

BIGGLES of 266



Capt. W. E. JOHNS

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FOREWORD

THESE ARE some of the earliest Biggles stories. They appeared in "The Modern Boy" about 1932, when the events of the Kaiser's war were still fresh in mind, and deal with that period of air combat when one could only qualify for the title ace by shooting down a certain number of enemy aircraft. In the French Service the number was five: in Germany, ten. The Air Ministry did not acknowledge the system, but in scout squadrons victories were counted unofficially.

To the student of modern warfare and high-performance aircraft these stories will appear far-fetched. So they are. But in 1916 war-flying *was* far-fetched. So were some of the incidents of Hitler's war, if it comes to that. I doubt if any writer would court derision by having his hero fall out of an aircraft flying at 18,000 feet without a parachute—and live to tell the tale.

The great difference between the two wars was this. The machines of 1915-16, with a top speed of under 100 m.p.h., and landing speeds in proportion, could get down almost anywhere. Pilots thought little of landing in a field to ask the way, have a cigarette, or beg a drink of water. In this way spies could be landed behind the enemy lines. Occasionally a pilot would do it for sheer devilment. Frank Luke, the American pilot who won the Congressional Medal of Honour, lost his life doing it. The day being hot he landed by a brook for a drink. Caught in the act by German troops he fought with his pistol until he was killed. He was the champion balloon buster, having shot down thirteen in a fortnight. Most pilots kept clear of them.

Strange stories could be told of kite balloons. An officer known to the writer, finding himself at 3,000 feet with his balloon on fire and no parachute, decided to go down the cable. He slid most of the way, removing the flesh from his

hands and thighs. But he lived. Operations replaced the flesh from another part of his body, although when the author saw him, in Newcastle, after the war, he still had difficulty in closing his hands.

Colonel Strange, while his machine was upside down in a combat, fell out. But hanging on to his gun he managed to climb back, right the machine and fly home. Madon, the French ace, once shot the goggles off a German gunner—and caught them in mid-air. You may have heard the uncanny story of the R.E.8 that came home by itself and made a reasonable landing with pilot and gunner dead in their seats.

Examples to strain the credulity could be given indefinitely, and those given above are merely quoted to show the sort of thing that could happen when war-flying was in its infancy. The writer fell out of control into Germany from 19,000 feet, and—to his surprise— found himself still alive.

Discipline in some squadrons, particularly scout squadrons, hardly existed, although there was a tendency to tighten things up towards the end. But in the early days, as long as a pilot did his job, nobody bothered much about what else he did. There was no radio to tell a hunting pilot where to go, or what to do, once his wheels were off the ground.

Well, they were great days, days the world will never see again, and Biggles, like most pilots of the period, made the most of them.

W.E.J.

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A RIDE TO REMEMBER

SECOND-LIEUT. BIGGLESWORTH, of No. 266 Squadron, R.F.C., stationed at Maranique, France, settled himself in a deck-chair, cocked his feet up on the balustrade that ran round the verandah in front of the officers' mess, yawned lazily in the summer sunshine, and then looked up at the group of pilots who had collected there while awaiting the summons of the luncheon gong.

"What do you think about it, Biggles?" asked Mahoney, his flight-commander, fishing a pip from his glass of lemon crush.

"About what?"

"I say that the fellow who goes about this war casually volunteering for this and that has about as much chance of seeing the dawn of peace as a snowball has of surviving midsummer in the Sahara. Sooner or later he gets it—he's bound to. I could give you scores of instances. Take Leslie Binton for example—"

"I never heard anyone talk as much drivel as you," interrupted Biggles wearily. "You sit here day after day laying down the law about how to avoid getting pushed out of this world, but do you practise what you preach? Not on your life! If the Old Man came along here now and said he wanted some poor prune to fly upside down at fifty feet over the Boche lines, you'd be the first to reach for your flying togs. I'm not saying you're wrong about this volunteer stuff. Personally, I think you're right, because it stands to reason that the pitcher that goest oftenest to the well gets a better chance of being busted than the one that sits on the shelf."

"Not necessarily," argued Wells, a Canadian pilot with a good deal of experience who had recently joined the squadron. "It's just as likely to get knocked off the shelf on

to the floor. It's no more true than the proverb about an empty pitcher making the most noise."

"Are you telling me I'm an empty pitcher?" inquired Biggles coldly.

"Wait a minute—let me finish. What I was going to say was, you're as bad as Mahoney. You say the volunteer act doesn't pay—"

"It doesn't!"

"Then why do you take a pace forward every time a sticky job comes along?"

"To save poor hoots like you from getting their pants scorched."

"Rot! Well, you go ahead, but anyone in his right mind can get all the trouble he wants out here in France without looking for it. All the same, I aim to outlive you guys by at least three weeks."

There was a sudden stir, and a respectful silence fell as Major Mullen, the C.O., and Colonel Raymond, of Wing Headquarters, walked up the short flight of stairs from the Squadron Office.

Biggles took one glance at the major's face, caught Mahoney's eye and winked.

The C.O. was too young to dissemble and he showed his anxiety plainly when the squadron was selected for a particularly dangerous task. He looked around the assembled officers. "All right, gentlemen, sit down," he said quietly. "Is everybody here, Mahoney?" he went on, addressing the senior flight-commander.

"Yes, I think so, sir."

"Good. I won't waste time beating about the bush, then. I want an officer to—"

Biggles and Mahoney sprang up together. Wells took a pace forward and several other officers edged nearer the C.O.

Major Mullen smiled. "No, I shan't want you, Bigglesworth—or you, Mahoney. Wells, you've had a good

deal of experience at reconnaissance, haven't you?"

"Yes, sir," replied Wells eagerly, turning to frown at Biggles, who had tittered audibly.

"Good. Have a word with Colonel Raymond, will you? He will explain what he wants."

"But, sir—" began Biggles.

The C.O. silenced him with a gesture. "I'm not in the least anxious to lose my best pilots," he said softly, as Wells and the Colonel disappeared into the anteroom, and the other officers filed into the dining-room as the gong sounded.

"This must be something extra sticky," growled Biggles to Mahoney as they followed. "It would have been a lot more sensible to hand the job to someone—"

"I never heard anyone talk as much drivel as you do," mimicked Mahoney, and sidestepped quickly to avoid the jab that Biggles aimed at him.

"You go and get on with your O.P.¹," Biggles told him sourly.

"Aren't you flying this afternoon?"

"No, my kite's flying a bit left-wing low, but I may test her if she's finished in time."

After lunch, Biggles made his way slowly to the sheds, where he found the riggers putting the last touches to his machine. "All right, Flight?" he asked Smyth, his flight-sergeant.

"She's O.K. now, sir, I think," replied the N.C.O. briskly.

"Fine! Start her up. I'll test her."

Ten minutes later, at two thousand feet above the aerodrome, he concluded his test with a couple of flick loops, and, satisfied that the machine was now rigged as he liked it, he eyed the eastern sky meditatively.

"There's nothing to do on the floor, so I might as well take a prowling round," he decided, and turned his nose in the direction of the Lines.

Mahoney, sitting at the head of his Flight in front of the hangars, with his engine ticking over in readiness for the afternoon patrol, watched him go with a curious expression that was half frown and half smile.

"There he goes," he mused. "He can't keep out of it. One day, I suppose—"

Not waiting to complete his remark he shoved the throttle open and sped across the short turf.

For an hour or more Biggles soared in the blue sky searching for hostile aircraft, or anything to distract him from the irritating attentions of archie², but in vain. The sky seemed deserted, and he was about to turn back towards the Lines when a movement far below and many miles inside enemy country caught his eye.

It was only a tiny flash, and would have passed unnoticed by anyone except an experienced pilot. But he knew that it was the reflection of the sun's rays on the planes of a banking machine. Instinctively he turned towards it, peering down through the swirling arc of his propeller and pushing up his goggles to see more clearly.

Presently he made out a whirling group of highly coloured machines, and his lips set in a straight line as he observed the reason for their aerobatics. A solitary British machine, a Camel, with the same markings as his own, was fighting a lone battle against a *staffel*³ of Albatros scouts that swarmed around it like flies round a honey-pot. The pilot was putting up a brilliant fight twisting and half-rolling as he fought his way inch by inch towards the Lines; but he was losing height rapidly.

Biggles half closed his eyes, and his top lip curled back from his teeth as he stood his machine on its nose and plunged down like a bolt from the blue, wires and struts screaming protest.

His speed outdistanced his altimeter, and it was still on the four thousand feet mark when he was down to two

thousand, with the tragedy written plain to see. It was Wells being forced down by ten or a dozen Huns.

A pilot of less courage might well have considered landing in the face of such frightful odds and thus escape the fate that must, if he persisted, sooner or later overtake him; but apparently no such thought entered Wells' head.

Biggles was still a thousand feet away when the end came. A stream of flame leapt from the side of the Camel and a cloud of black smoke swirled aft. The pilot, instead of sideslipping into the ground, soared upwards like a rocketing pheasant, in a last wild effort to take his destroyer with him; but the wily Hun pilot saw him coming and swerved in the nick of time.

A sheet of flame leapt back over the cockpit of the stricken Camel as it stalled at the top of its zoom. The pilot, with an arm over his face, climbed out on the fuselage, stood poised for an instant, then jumped clear into space.

The German pilot, fascinated by the slowly somersaulting leather-jacketed figure, raised his hand in salute, and at that moment Biggles' tracer bullets bored a group of holes between his shoulders. The German, without knowing what had hit him, lurched forward across his control-stick and the Albatros buried itself deep in the ground not a hundred feet from the smoking remains of its victim.

Biggles, pale as death and fighting mad, swung round just as the leader of the Hun *staffel* took him in his sights, far outside effective range, and fired a short burst. It was a thousand-to-one chance, but it came off. A single bullet struck Biggles' machine, but it struck one of the few vulnerable spots—the propeller. There was a vibrating, bellowing roar as the engine, now unbalanced and freed from the brake on its progress, raced, and nearly tore itself from the engine bearers.

Biggles, not knowing for a moment what had happened, was nearly flung out by the vibration, but as he throttled back and saw the jagged ends of the wooden blades, he

snarled savagely and looked below. There was no help for it; an aeroplane cannot remain in the air without a propeller, so down he had to go.

Immediately he looked below he knew that a crash was inevitable, for his height was less than five hundred feet and the combat had taken him over a far-reaching forest. He switched off automatically, to prevent the risk of fire, and flattened out a few feet above the treetops for a "pancake" landing. At the last instant, as the machine wobbled unsteadily before dropping bodily into the trees, he raised his knees to his chin and buried his face in his arms.

There was a splintering, tearing crash of woodwork and fabric, a jar that shook every tooth in his head, and then a silence broken only by the receding drone of Mercedes engines.

Slowly he unfolded himself and looked around. The machine, as he had guessed, was caught up in the topmost branches of a large tree, and it swayed unsteadily as he moved.

Remembering that more than one pilot who had crashed in similar circumstances had been killed by falling from the tree and breaking his neck, he unfastened his safety belt and crept cautiously to the nearest fork, from where he made his way, inch by inch, to the trunk. After that it was fairly plain sailing, although he had to jump the last ten or twelve feet to the ground.

In the silent aisles of the forest he paused to listen, for he knew that the Boche pilots would quickly direct a ground force to the spot; but he could hear nothing.

A steady rain of petrol was dripping from the tree, and he set about his last duty. He divested himself of his flying coat which would now only be an encumbrance, and after removing the maps from the pocket thrust it far under a bush. Then he threw the maps under the dripping petrol and flung a lighted match after them.

There was a loud *whoosh* as the petrol-laden air took fire. A tongue of flame shot upward to the suspended Camel which instantly became a blazing inferno. He sighed regretfully, and then set off at a steady jog-trot through the trees in the direction of the Lines.

A few minutes later the sound of voices ahead brought him up with a jerk, and he just had time to fling himself under a convenient clump of holly bushes when a line of grey-clad troops in coal-scuttle helmets, with an officer at their head, passed him at the double, going in the direction of the source of the smoke that drifted overhead.

Satisfied they were out of earshot he proceeded on his way, but with more care. Again he stopped as a clearing came into view. A low buzz of conversation reached him. He began to make a detour round the spot, but his curiosity got the better of him, and, risking a peep through the undergrowth at the edge of the clearing, he saw a curious sight.

An area of about two acres had been cleared, and in the middle of it four enormous concrete beds had been laid down in a rough line. Three appeared to be actually complete, and a gang of men were engaged in smoothing the surface of the fourth.

He did not stop to wonder at their purpose, but they reminded him vaguely of some big gun emplacements that he had once seen far over the British side of the Lines. Dodging from tree to tree, sometimes dropping to all fours to cross an open place, he pressed forward, anxious to get as near to the lines as possible before nightfall.

Just what he hoped to do when he reached them he did not know, but it was not within his nature to submit calmly to capture while a chance of escape remained. He would consider the question of working his way through the Lines when he reached them.

The sun was already low when the German balloon line came into view. Far beyond it he could see the British

balloons hanging motionless in the glowing western sky. Presently, he knew, they would be hauled down for the night; in fact, the nearest German balloon was already being dragged down by its powerful winch.

He wondered why it was being taken in so early, until the low, unmistakable hum of a Bentley engine reached his ears. Then he saw it, a solitary Camel, streaking in his direction. It was flying low, the British pilot altering his course from time to time, almost as if he was picking his way through the dark smudges of smoke that blossomed out around him as the German archie gunners did their best to end the career of the impudent Britisher.

Biggles, watching it as it passed overhead, recognised Mahoney's streamers, and guessed the reason for its mission. It was looking for him—for the crash that would tell his own story—and he smiled grimly as the Camel circled once over the scene that appeared to tell the story of the tragedy only too plainly. Then it turned back towards the lines and was soon lost in the distance.

"They'll be drinking a final cup to the memory of poor old Wells and myself presently!" he mused.

He hesitated on the edge of a narrow lane that crossed his path. He traversed it swiftly after a quick glance to left and right, and taking cover by the side of a thick hedge, held on his way. He came upon the Boche balloon party quite suddenly, and crept into a coppice that bordered the lair of the silken monster in order to get a closer view of it. Balloons were common enough in the air, but few pilots were given an opportunity of examining one on the ground.

It was still poised a few feet above the field, with the basket actually touching the turf, and was being held down by the men of the balloon section who were rather anxiously watching two observers, easily recognised by their heavy flying kit, now talking to the officer in charge a short distance away.

It was easy to guess what had happened. The balloon had been hauled down when Mahoney's Camel came into sight, and a consultation was now being held as to whether or not it was worth while sending it up again. The observers were evidently in favour of remaining on the ground, for they pointed repeatedly to the direction in which the Camel had disappeared and then towards the kite-balloon.

The balloon had been released from its cable and was straining in the freshening breeze, which, by an unusual chance, was blowing towards the British Lines.

As Biggles realised this, the germ of an idea crept into his mind, but it was so fantastic that he dismissed it. Yet in spite of his efforts, the thought persisted. If the balloon were free—as it would be if the crew released their hold on it—it would inevitably be blown over the British Lines, and, naturally, anyone in the basket would go with it.

He did not stop to ponder what would happen when it got there; sufficient for him in his present predicament to know that if in some way he could get into the basket and compel the crew to release their hold on the balloon, he would soon be over friendly country, instead of remaining in Germany with the prospect of staying there for the duration of the War.

Reluctantly he was compelled to dismiss the idea, for to attack the whole balloon section single-handed and unarmed was a proposition that could not be considered seriously. So from his place of concealment he watched the scene for a few minutes despondently; and he was about to turn away to resume his march when a new factor introduced itself and made him catch his breath in excitement.

The first indication of it was the distant but rapidly approaching roar of an aero engine. The balloon crew heard it, too, and evidently guessed, as well as Biggles, just what it portended, for there was a general stir as the men

craned their necks to see the approaching machine and tried to drag their charge towards the coppice.

The stir became more pronounced as Mahoney's Camel leapt into view over the trees and swooped down upon the balloon in its lair.

"He's peeved because he thinks I've gone West, so he's ready to shoot up anyone and anything," was the thought that flashed into Biggles' brain.

The chatter of the twin Vickers guns broke into his thoughts, and he watched the scene spellbound, for the stir now became panic. Two or three of the crew had fallen under the hail of lead, while several more were in open flight, leaving the balloon in the grip of the few more courageous ones, who shouted for help as they struggled to keep the now swaying gasbag on the ground.

Biggles could see what was about to happen, and was on his feet actually before the plan had been born in his brain, sprinting like a deer across the open towards his only hope of salvation. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Mahoney's Camel twisting and turning as it ran for the Lines through a blaze of archie.

He heard a shout behind him, but he did not stop. As a drowning man clutches at a straw in the last frenzy of despair so he hurled himself at the basket of the balloon. As in a dream, he heard more shouts and running footsteps. Luckily, the nearest man had his back towards him, and Biggles flung him aside with a mighty thrust. He grabbed the rim of the basket, and lifting his feet, kicked the second man aside.

Just what happened after that would not be easy to describe. It was all confused. He saw the two remaining members of the crew start back, the balloon forgotten in their astonishment and fright, and the next moment he was jerked upwards with such force that he lost his grip with his right hand, and felt sure his left arm would be torn from its socket. But with the fear of death in his heart he clung on.

Somehow his right hand joined the left on the rim of the basket. His feet beat a wild tattoo on the wickerwork sides as they sought to find a foothold to take his weight, in order to relieve the strain on his arms and enable him to climb up to temporary safety.

His muscles grew numb with the strain, and just as he felt his strength leaving him his right knee struck something soft. In an instant his leg had curled round the object, and he made a last supreme effort. Inch by inch he lifted his body, which seemed to weigh a ton, until his chin was level with the rim of the basket; his foot swung up over the edge. For two seconds he lay balanced, then fell inwards gasping for breath and clutching at his hammering heart.

For perhaps a minute he could only lie and pant, perspiration pouring down his face, for the strain had been terrific. Then sheer will-power conquered, and, hauling himself up to the edge of the basket, he looked over the side, only to receive another shock that left him staring helplessly.

Just what he had expected to see he had not stopped to consider, but he certainly imagined that he would still be within reasonable distance of the ground. That the balloon, freed from its anchor, could shoot up to seven or eight thousand feet in two or three minutes was outside his knowledge of aeronautics. Yet such was the case.

So far below that he could no longer see the spot where he had left the ground, lay the earth, a vast indigo basin that merged into blue and purple shadows at the distant horizon. The deep rumble of the guns along the Line, like a peal of distant thunder, was the only sound that reached his ears. He was oppressed by a curious sense of loneliness, for there was nothing he could do except watch his slow progress towards the shell-torn strip of No Man's Land between the opposing front-line trenches, now visible like a

long, ugly scar across the western landscape; so he fell to examining his unusual aircraft.

Above loomed the gigantic body of the gasbag; around him hung a maze of ropes and lines. A small drawing board, with a map pinned on it, was fastened at an inclined angle to one side of the basket, and near it, hanging half over the rim, just as it had been casually thrown by its last wearer, was the complicated webbing harness of a parachute.

He followed the life line and saw that it was connected to a bulging case outside the basket, the same protuberance which had assisted him to climb up when he had been dangling in space.

The parachute interested him, for it represented a means of getting back to earth if all else failed. But he regarded the apparatus with grim suspicion. He had, of course, seen the device employed many times, both on the British and German side of the Lines, but it had been from a distance, and as a mildly interested spectator. It had never occurred to him that he might one day be called upon to use one.

He fitted the harness over his shoulders, and with some difficulty adjusted the thigh straps. Then he looked over the side again, and for the first time in his life really appreciated the effort of will required to jump into space from such a ghastly height.

A terrific explosion somewhere near at hand brought his heart into his mouth, and he stared upwards under the impression that the balloon had burst. To his infinite relief he saw that it was still intact, but a smudge of black smoke was drifting slowly past it. He recognised his old enemy, archie, and wondered why the burst made so much noise—until he remembered that he was accustomed to hearing it above the roar of an aero engine. In the deathly silence the sound was infinitely more disturbing.

Another shell, quickly followed by another, came up, and burst with explosions that made the basket quiver. The smoke being black indicated that the shells were being

fired by German gunners, so he assumed that they had been made aware of what had occurred and were endeavouring to prevent him from reaching the British Lines.

At that moment a white archie burst flamed amongst the black ones, and he eyed it mournfully, realising that the British gunners had spotted the balloon as a German, and were making good practice on it. To be archied by the gunners of both sides was something that he had never supposed possible.

Slowly, but with horrible certainty, the shells crept nearer as the gunners corrected their aim, and more than once the shrill *whe-e-e-e* of flying shrapnel made him duck.

"This is no blinking joke," he muttered savagely. "I shall soon have to be doing something. But what?"

He had a confused recollection that a balloon had some sort of device which allowed the gas to escape, with the result that it sank slowly earthward. But desperate though the circumstances were, he dared not pull any of the trailing cords, for he knew that there was yet another which ripped a panel out of the top, or side, of the fabric, and allowed the whole structure to fall like a stone.

He eyed the dark bulk above him sombrely. Somehow or other he must allow the gas to escape in order to lose altitude, and for a wild moment he thought of trying to climb up the guy ropes to the fabric and then cutting a hole in it with his penknife; but he shrank from the ordeal.

An extra close burst of archie made him stagger, and in something like panic he grabbed one of the ropes and pulled it gingerly. Nothing happened. He pulled harder, but still nothing happened.

"Why the dickens don't they fix control-sticks to these kites?" he snarled, and was about to give the rope a harder pull when the roar of an aero engine accompanied by the staccato chatter of a machine-gun, struck his ears.

"It looks as if it's me against the rest of the world!" he thought bitterly, as a Camel swept into view.

It banked steeply, a perfect evolution that in other circumstances would have been a joy to behold, and then tore back at him, guns spurting orange flame that glowed luridly in the half-light. It disappeared from view behind the bulk of the gasbag, and with a sinking feeling in his heart he knew that the end of his journey was at hand.

The chatter of the guns made him wince, and, leaning out of the basket, he saw a tiny tongue of flame lick up the side of the bellying fabric.

Now there are moments in dire peril when fear ceases to exist and one acts with deliberation that is the product of final despair. For Biggles this was one of them. All was lost, so nothing mattered.

"Well, here goes; I'm not going to be fried alive!" he said recklessly, and climbing up on to the edge of the basket, he dived outwards.

As he somersaulted slowly through space the scene around him seemed to take on the curious aspect of a slow motion film. He saw the balloon, far above, enveloped in a sheet of flame. The Camel was still banking, but so slowly, it seemed, that the thought flashed through his mind that it would stall and fall into flames.

Then the blazing mass above was blotted out by a curious grey cloud that seemed to mushroom out above him. He was conscious of a sudden jerk; the sensation of falling ceased, and he felt that he was floating in space on an invisible cushion of incredible softness,

"The parachute!" he gasped, suddenly understanding. "It's opened!"

Then the Camel swept into sight again from beyond the parachute and dived towards him, the pilot waving a cheerful greeting.

Biggles stared at the markings on the fuselage. There was no mistaking them. It was Mahoney's machine. He

smiled as the humour of the situation struck him; and placing his thumb to his nose, he extended his fingers in the time-honoured manner.

Mahoney, who at that moment was turning away, changed his mind and flew closer, as if to confirm the incredible spectacle. But the swiftly-falling figure raced him to earth before he could come up with it again.

Biggles saw with a shock that he was now very close to the ground, and even while he was thinking of the best way to fall he struck it. The wind was knocked out of him, but he was past caring about such trifles.

Picking himself up quickly, he saw with relief that the fabric had become entangled in some bushes, which arrested its progress and thus prevented him from being dragged.

It was nearly dark, and strangely quiet, so he assumed that he must have fallen some distance behind the Lines, a state of affairs he was quickly able to confirm from a pedestrian whom he accosted on a road which he came upon after crossing two or three fields.

An hour later, the car he had hired at the nearest village pulled up at Maranique, and, after paying the driver, he walked briskly towards the mess. Noticing that a light was still shining in the Squadron Office, he glanced through the window as he passed, and saw Colonel Raymond in earnest consultation with the C.O.. He knocked on the door, and smiled wanly when he saw the amazed expressions on the faces of the two senior officers.

"Good gracious, Bigglesworth!" stammered Major Mullen. "We thought—Mahoney said—"

"Yes, I know, sir," broke in Biggles. "I went down over the other side, but I've managed to get back. I'm sorry to say that poor Wells has gone West, though."

"What happened?" asked the C.O..

Briefly, Biggles gave him an account of his adventures. When he mentioned, quite casually, the concrete emplacements he had seen in the forest, Colonel Raymond sprang to his feet with a sharp cry.

“You saw them?” he ejaculated.

“Why, yes sir,” replied Biggles. “Is there anything remarkable about them?”

“Remarkable! It’s the most amazing coincidence I ever heard of in my life!” And then, noting the puzzled look on the faces of the others: “You see,” he explained, “we heard that the Boche were bringing up some new long range guns, and to try to locate them was the mission poor Wells undertook this afternoon! You’ve found them—by sheer accident!

If you will mark them down on the map I’ll get back to headquarters right away!”

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[1](#) Offensive Patrol.

[2](#) Anti-aircraft gunfire.

[3](#) German. *Staffel*, short for *jadgstaffel*. German squadron equivalent.

THE CAMERA

BIGGLES LANDED, taxied in, and sat for a moment or two on the "hump" of his Camel in front of the hangars. Then he yawned, switched off, and climbed stiffly to the ground.

"Is she flying all right, sir?" asked Smyth, his flight-sergeant, running up.

"She's inclined to be a bit heavy on right rudder—nothing very much, but you might have a look at her."

"Very good, sir," replied the N.C.O., feeling the slack flying wires disapprovingly. "She wasn't like this when you took off, sir."

"Of course she wasn't! You don't suppose I've just been footling about between here and the Lines, do you?"

"No, sir: but you must have chucked her about a bit to get her into this state."

Biggles yawned again, for he had been flying very high and was tired; but he did not think it worth while to describe a little affair he had had with a German Rumpler near Lille. "Perhaps you're right," he admitted, and strolled slowly towards the officers' mess.

A hum of conversation came from the ante-room as he opened the door.

"What's all the noise about?" he asked as he sank down into a chair.

"Mac was just talking about narrow escapes," replied Mahoney.

"Narrow escapes? What are they?" asked Biggles curiously.

"Why, don't you have any?" inquired Algy Lacey, who had joined the squadron not long before.

"It depends what you call 'narrow'," Biggles replied.

"Oh, hallo, Bigglesworth! There you are!" said the C.O. from the door. "Come outside a minute, will you? Colonel

Raymond, from Wing Headquarters, wants a word with you," he went on as the door closed behind them.

Biggles saluted and then shook hands with the Wing officer.

"I've got a job for you, my boy," smiled the Colonel.

Biggles grinned. "I was hoping you'd just called to see how I was," he murmured.

"I've no time for pleasure trips," laughed the Colonel. "But seriously, this is really something in your line; although, to be quite fair, I've put the same proposition to two or three other officers whom I can trust, in the hope that someone will succeed if the others fail."

"Is Wilks—Wilkinson, I mean—one of them?" asked Biggles.

"Yes, and with an S.E.5 he might stand a better chance of success than you do in a Camel."

Biggles stiffened. "I see," he said shortly. "What is—"

"I'm coming to that now," broke in the Colonel. "By the way, what do you think of this?"

He passed an enlarged photograph.

Biggles took it and stared at it with real interest, for it was the most perfect example of air photography he had ever seen. Although it must have been taken from a great height, every road, trench, tree, and building stood out as clearly as if it had been taken from a thousand feet or less.

"By jingo! That's a smasher!" he muttered. "Is it one of ours?"

"Yes: but I'm afraid it's the last one we shall ever get like it," replied the Colonel.

Biggles looked up with a puzzled expression.

"The Huns are using that camera now."

"Camera! Why, is there only one of them?"

"There is only one camera in the world that can take a photograph as perfect as that, and the Germans produced it. It's all in the lens, of course, and I've an idea that that particular lens was never originally intended for a camera.

It may have been specially ground for a telescope, or a microscope, but that is neither here nor there. As far as we are concerned, the Germans adapted it for a camera and we soon knew about it by the quality of the photographs that fell into our hands from German machines that came down over our side of the Lines.

"I'll give you the facts, although I must be brief, as I have much to do. About three months ago we had a stroke of luck—a stroke that we never expected. The machine that was carrying the camera force-landed over our side, although force-landed is hardly the word. Apparently it came down rather low to avoid cloud interference, and the pilot was killed outright by archie, in the air. The observer was wounded, but he managed to get the machine down after a fashion.

"As soon as he was on the ground he fainted, which may account for the fact that he did not destroy or conceal the camera before he was taken prisoner. That was how the camera fell into our hands, and we lost no time in putting it to work. Needless to say, we took every possible precaution to prevent the Germans getting it back again.

"We had it fitted to a special D.H.4, the pilot of which had orders on no account to cross the Lines below eighteen thousand feet. Naturally, we had to send the machine over the Lines, otherwise the instrument would have been no use to us; we didn't want photographs of our own positions. This pilot also had instructions to avoid combat at all costs, but if he did get into trouble, he was to throw the camera overboard, or do anything he liked with it as long as the Germans didn't get hold of it again."

"What was to prevent the Huns making another camera like it? Couldn't they make another lens?" asked Biggles.

"Good gracious, no! A lens of that sort takes years of grinding to make it perfect. I doubt if that particular one was produced inside five years, and being worked on all the time."

"I see."

"Well, you will be sorry to hear that the camera is now in German hands again."

"How the dickens did they get it?" exclaimed Biggles.

The Colonel made a wry face and shrugged his shoulders. "We may learn after the war is over," he said. "Perhaps we shall never know. The two officers who were in the D.H.4 are both prisoners so we have no means of finding out. One can only imagine that they were shot down or were forced down by structural failure, although how and why they failed to destroy the camera, knowing its vital importance, is a mystery.

"We were sorry when the machine failed to return— and we were astounded when the Germans began using the camera again, because we felt certain that our fellows would have disposed of it, somehow or another. Naturally if the machine had been shot down from a great height, or in flames, the camera would have been ruined. Well, there it is. Our agents in Germany have confirmed the story. They say that the Germans have the camera, and are tickled to death about it. To make sure that they don't lose it again they've built a special machine to carry it, and that machine is now operating over our Lines at an enormous altitude."

"What type of machine?" asked Biggles.

"Ah, that we don't know!"

"Then you don't know where it's operating, or what limit of climb it's got?"

"On the contrary," the Colonel replied, "we have every reason to believe that it is now operating over this very sector. The archie gunners have reported a machine flying at a colossal height, outside the range of their guns. They estimate the height at twenty-four thousand feet."

"What!" Biggles exclaimed. "How am I going to get up there? I can't fly higher than my Camel will go!"

"That's for you to work out. We are having a special machine built, but it will be two or three months before it is

ready. Meanwhile, we have got to stop the Germans using that instrument. If we can get it back intact, so much the better. Rather than let the Germans retain it, we would destroy it; but, naturally, we should like to get it back."

"If the machine was shot down and crashed, or fell in flames, that would be the end of the camera?" Biggles queried. "And if the crew found they were forced to land they would throw the thing overboard, in which case it would be busted?"

"Unquestionably."

Biggles scratched his head.

"You seem to have set a pretty problem," he observed. "If we don't shoot the machine down, we don't get the camera. If we do shoot it down, we lose it. That's what it amounts to. Puzzle—how to get the camera! Bit of a conundrum, isn't it?"

"Well, there must be an answer," smiled the Colonel, "because it has already been captured twice. We got it once and the Germans got it back."

"Well, sir, I'm no magician, but I'll do my best."

"Think it over—and let me know when you've got it."

Biggles walked back to the ante-room, deep in thought.

"Let him know when I've got it, eh?" he mused. "By James! What a nerve!"

Later in the day a lot of cloud blew up from the south and west, and as this would, he knew, effectually prevent high-altitude photography, Biggles did no flying, but roamed about the sheds trying to find a solution to the difficult problem that confronted him. Finally he went to bed, still unable to see how the impossible could be accomplished.

He was still in bed the following morning—for Mahoney was leading the dawn patrol—when an orderly-room clerk wakened him by rapping on his door and handing in a message.

Biggles took the strip of paper, looked at it, then leapt out of bed as if he had been stung. It was from the Operations Office, Wing Headquarters, and was initialled by Colonel Raymond. "High-altitude reconnaissance biplane crossed the Lines at seven-twenty-three near Bethune," he read.

That was all. The message did not state that the machine was *the* machine, but the suggestion was obvious. So, pulling a thick sweater over his pyjamas and hastily climbing into his flying-suit, he made for the sheds without even stopping for the customary cup of tea and a biscuit.

He fumed impatiently in the cockpit of his Camel until the engine was warm enough to take off and then streaked into the air in the direction of the last known position of the enemy machine.

While still some distance away from Bethune he saw two S.E.5's climbing fast in the same direction, but paid no further heed to them, for he had also seen a long line of white archie bursts marking a trail across the blue of the early morning sky.

By raising his goggles and riveting his eyes on the head of the trail of smoke he could just see the tiny sparks of white light from the blazing archie as the gunners followed the raider, who was, however, still invisible.

"By James, he's high, and no mistake!" thought Biggles as he altered his course slightly, to cut between the hostile machine and the Lines, noticing that the two British S.E.5's carried on the pursuit on a direct course for the objective.

Five minutes later, at fifteen thousand feet, he could just see the Boche, a tiny black speck winging slowly through the blue just in front of the nearest archie bursts. Another ten minutes passed, during which time he added another two thousand feet to his altitude, and he could then see the machine plainly.

"That plane came out of the Halberstadt works, I'll bet my shirt!" he mused, as he watched it closely. "There's no mistaking the cut. Well, I expect that's it!" he concluded, as

the terrific height at which the machine was flying became apparent. He had never seen an aeroplane flying so high before, and from the Colonel's description it could only be the special photographic machine.

It did not take him long to realise that any hopes he may have had of engaging it in combat were not to be fulfilled, for although he could manage twenty thousand feet, the enemy plane was still a good two thousand feet above him. To his intense annoyance it actually glided down a little way towards him, and he distinctly saw the observer produce a small camera and take a photograph of him.

"That's to show his pals what a lot of poor boobs we are, I suppose," Biggles muttered. Then a slight flush tinged his cheeks as the observer leaned far out of his cockpit and put his thumb to his nose to express his contempt.

"So that's how you feel, is it, you sausage guzzler?" snarled Biggles. "That's where you spoil yourself. I'm going to get you, sooner or later, if I have to sprout wings out of my shoulder-blades to do it!"

An S.E.5 sailed across his field of view, nose up and tail dragging at stalling-point as the propeller strove to grasp the thin air. As he watched, the machine slipped off on to one wing and lost a full thousand feet of height before the pilot could recover control.

He recognised the machine as Wilkinson's, from the neighbouring squadron, and could well imagine the pilot's disgust, for it would take him a good twenty minutes to recover his lost height.

"Ugh, it's perishing cold up here!" he muttered, as he wiped the frost from his windscreen, and then turned his attention again to the Hun, who was now flying to and fro methodically in the recognised manner of a photographic plane obtaining strip photographs of a certain area. Looking down, Biggles saw that it was over a large British rest-camp.

"I'd better warn those lads when I get back that they are likely to have a bunch of bombs unloaded on 'em tonight," he thought, guessing that before the day was out the photographs now being taken by the black-crossed machine would be in the hands of the German bomber squadrons.

"Well, I suppose it's no use sitting up here and getting frost-bitten," he continued morosely, as he saw the S.E. abandon the chase and begin a long glide back towards its aerodrome. "Still, I'll just leave you my card."

He put his nose down to gather all the speed possible, and then, pulling the control-stick back until it touched his safety-belt, he stood the Camel on its tail and sprayed the distant target with his guns. He was still at a range at which shooting was really a waste of ammunition, but he derived a little satisfaction from the action. The Camel hung in the air for a second, with vainly threshing prop, and a line of tracer bullets streaked upwards.

The enemy observer apparently guessed what Biggles was doing, and called the pilot's attention, but he did not bother to return the fire. As one man, pilot and observer raised their thumbs to their noses and extended their fingers.

Biggles' face grew crimson with mortification, but he had no time to dwell on the insult, for the nose of the Camel whipped over as it stalled viciously, and only the safety-belt prevented him from being flung over the centre section. From the stall the machine went into a spin, from which he could not pull it out until he was down to eighteen thousand feet.

For a moment he thought of going over the Lines in search of something on which to vent his anger, but the chilly atmosphere had given him a keen appetite so he decided to go home for some breakfast instead, and turned his nose towards Maranique. Looking back, he could still see the enemy pilot pursuing his leisurely way.

After a quick breakfast, he returned to the sheds, and called Smythe, his flight-sergeant, to one side.

"Now," he began, "by hook or by crook I've got to put three thousand feet on to the ceiling of this machine!"

The N.C.O. opened his eyes in surprise, then shook his head. "That's impossible, sir," he said.

"I knew you'd say that," replied Biggles, "but it's only because you haven't stopped to think. Now, suppose some tyrant had you in his power and promised to torture you slowly to the most frightful death if you couldn't put a few more feet on to the altitude of a Camel. What would you say?"

The flight-sergeant hesitated. "Well, in that case, sir, I believe—"

"You don't believe!" retorted Biggles. "You know jolly well you'd do it: you'd employ every trick you knew to stick those extra few feet on. Very well; now let's get down to it and see what we can do. First of all, what weight can we take off her? Every pound we take off means so many extra feet of climb—that's right, isn't it?"

"Quite right, sir."

"Well, then, first of all we can take the tank out and put a smaller one in holding, say, an hour's petrol. Instead of carrying the usual twenty-six gallons, I'll carry ten, which should save about a hundred pounds, for a rough guess. That means I can climb faster from the moment I take off. All the instruments can come out, and I can cut two ammunition belts to fifty rounds each. If I can't hit him with a hundred rounds he deserves to get away. If you can think of anything else to strip off, take it off. Talking of ammunition reminds me that I want the cut belts filled with ordinary bullets, not tracer. I don't want to set fire to anything. So much for the weight. Now, can you put a few more horses in the engine?"

"I could, but I wouldn't guarantee how long it would last."

"No matter—do it. If it will last an hour, that's all I want. And you can get some fellows polishing up the struts and fabric—and the prop. Skin friction takes off more miles an hour than a lot of people imagine. Now, is there any way that we can track on some more lift? It isn't speed I want, it's climb. Do you think we could build extensions on the wing-tips? Every inch of plane-surface helps."

"If we did," answered the flight-sergeant, "the machine would be a death-trap; they'd come off at the slightest strain."

"Still, it could be done."

The flight-sergeant thought hard for a moment. "I'll take the fabric off and look at the main spar," he said. "I've got two or three old wings about, so I should have material. I'm afraid the extensions would break away, though, or pull the whole plane clean off. The C.O.—"

"Don't you say a word about this to the C.O.. He'd want me to go down to the repair depot, and you know what they'd do. They'd just laugh their silly heads off. Well, you have a shot at it, flight-sergeant. I'll give you until tomorrow morning to finish."

"Tomorrow morning! It would take two or three days, even if it's possible!"

Biggles tapped him on the shoulder. "I shall be along at sparrow chirp tomorrow morning and if that kite isn't ready to fly, and, what is more, fly to twenty-three thousand, someone will get it in the neck!"

"Very good, sir," replied the flight-sergeant grimly.

He had been set a difficult task—almost an impossible one; but he knew when Biggles spoke in that tone of voice it was useless to argue. He got busy right away.

Biggles walked briskly back to the mess.

True to his word Biggles strode across the dew-soaked turf towards the sheds the following morning as the first grey streak appeared in the eastern sky, having already

rung up Wing Headquarters and asked that he might be informed at once if the high-flying German photographic machine was observed to cross the Lines within striking distance of Maranique.

A broad smile spread over his face as his eyes fell on his machine, to which a party of weary mechanics, who had evidently been up all night, were just putting the finishing touches.

Every spot of oil and every speck of dust had been removed from wings and fuselage, while the propeller gleamed like a mirror; but it was not that that made him smile. It was the extensions, for the top planes now overlapped the lower ones by a good eighteen inches.

"It looks pretty ghastly, I must say," he confessed to the flight-sergeant, who was superintending his handiwork with grim satisfaction. "Any of our lads who happen to see me in the air are likely to throw a fit."

Smyth nodded. "Yes, sir," was all he said, but it was as well that Biggles did not know what was passing in his mind.

"Well, let's get her out on to the tarmac ready to take off," ordered Biggles.

"Are you going to test her, sir?"

"I most certainly am not; there's no sense in taking risks for nothing. I can do all the testing I need when I'm actually on the job."

After a swift glance around to make sure no one was about they wheeled the modified Camel out on to the tarmac. A mechanic took his place by the propeller ready to start up and Biggles got into his flying kit.

The minutes passed slowly as the sky grew gradually lighter, and Biggles began to fear that the enemy machine was not going to put in an appearance. Just as he had given up hope, Wat Tyler, the recording officer, appeared running, with a strip of paper in his hand. He stopped dead

and recoiled as his eyes fell on the Camel's wing-tips, conspicuous in their incongruity.

"What the—what the—" he gasped.

"She's all right—don't worry," Biggles told him. "Her wings have sprouted a bit in the night, that's all. Is that message for me?"

"Yes. The German machine crossed the Lines about four minutes ago, between Bethune and Annoeulin, following the Bethune-Treizennes road. Wing have discovered that it's attached to the Flieger Abteilung at Seclin."

"Thanks!" replied Biggles, and climbed into his seat. He waved the chocks away after the engine had been run up and taxied slowly out into position to takeoff. "Well, here goes!" he muttered, as he opened the throttle.

The lightness of the loading was instantly apparent, for the machine came off the ground like a feather— so easily that he was off the ground before he was aware of it.

For some minutes he watched his new wing-tips anxiously, but except for a little vibration they seemed to be functioning perfectly, although a dive would no doubt take them off—and perhaps the wings as well.

Grinning with satisfaction he made for the course of the photographic machine, and, as on the previous morning, first picked it out by the line of archie smoke that was expending itself uselessly far below it.

A D.H.4 that was presumably under test came up and looked at him as he passed over the aerodrome of Chocques, the pilot shaking his head as if he could not believe his eyes.

"He thinks he's seeing things!" smiled Biggles. "He's going home now to tell the boys about it."

Three S.E.s were converging on his course some distance ahead, and they all banked sharply to get a clearer view of the apparition. Biggles waved them away, for he had no wish to be compelled to make a steep turn that might spell disaster.

He reached nineteen thousand feet in effortless style, and from the way the machine was behaving he felt that it would without difficulty make the three or four thousand feet necessary to reach the enemy machine. Progress became slower as he climbed, of course, and the German began to draw away from him, for it was flying level; so he edged his way between it and the Lines and watched for it to make the first move on its return journey.

He began to sing as the Camel climbed higher and higher, for whether he managed to bag the Hun or not he was at least getting a new thrill for his trouble. But soon afterwards he began to feel the effects of the rarefied air, which he had forgotten to take into consideration, so he stopped singing and concentrated his attention on the enemy aircraft, which was, he guessed, probably equipped with oxygen apparatus.

What his own exact altitude was he did not know, for the altimeter had been removed with the other instruments, but he felt that it must be between twenty-two and twenty-three thousand feet. He was still slightly below the Hun, but he felt that he could close the distance when he wished. The other was now flying up and down in regular lines as it had done before, with both members of the crew seemingly intent on their work. Once the observer stood up to glance below at where the three British S.E.s were still circling, and then resumed his task without once looking in Biggles' direction, obviously considering himself quite safe from attack.

Slowly but surely Biggles crept up under the enemy's tail, a quiver of excitement running through him as the moment for action drew near. To force the German machine to land without causing any damage to the camera was a problem for which he had still found no solution unless it was possible for him to hit its propeller, although he had doubt as to his ability to do that.

He was now within a hundred yards, and still neither of the Germans had seen him. He was tempted to shoot at once, for the machine presented a fairly easy target; but, following his plan of trying to hit the propeller, he put his nose down in order to overtake the big machine and attack it from the front.

Unfortunately, at that moment, the German pilot, who had reached the end of his beat, turned; the observer spotted him and jumped for his gun, but was just too late.

Biggles was already turning to bring his sights to bear; his hand found and pressed the gun lever. *Rat-tat-tat-tat...*

Biggles may have been lucky, for the result was instantaneous. Splinters flew off the big machine and it plunged earthwards. As it passed below him Biggles saw the pilot hanging limply forward on his safety-belt, and the observer frantically trying to recover control. He throttled back and followed it down, and as it came out into a glide he half expected to see the observer make a last attempt to reach the Lines; but either his courage failed him or he was too occupied in controlling the machine, for he made no such attempt.

Biggles waved an arm furiously as the waiting S.E.s closed in, but they stood aside as victor and vanquished sped through them, with Biggles so close that he could see the German observer's white face.

At a thousand feet from the ground Biggles saw him bend forward and struggle with something on the floor of the cockpit, and guessed that he was endeavouring to release the camera, about which he had no doubt had special instructions. But the warning rattle of Biggles' guns made him spring up again. In his anxiety he tried to land in a field that was really much too small for such a big machine, with the inevitable result. It crashed into the trees on the far side.

Biggles was also feeling anxious, for he knew that as soon as he was on the ground the German's first action would be

to destroy or hide the camera, so he took a risk that in the ordinary way he would have avoided. He put the machine into a steep side-slip, and tried to get into the same field.

As he flattened out he knew he had made a mistake, for the machine did not drop as it would normally have done, but continued to glide over the surface of the ground without losing height. The modifications that had been so advantageous a few minutes before were now his undoing, and although he fish-tailed hard to lose height, he could not get his wheels on the turf.

At a speed at which the machine would normally have stalled he was still gliding smoothly two feet above the ground, straight towards his victim. There was no question of turning, and to have forced the machine down would have meant a somersault.

Seeing that a crash was inevitable Biggles switched off and covered his face with his left arm, and in that position piled his Camel on to the wreckage of its victim.

He disengaged himself with the alacrity of long experience, and leapt clear—for the horror of fire is never far from an airman's mind—and looking round for the observer saw him standing a short distance away as if undecided whether to make a bolt for it or to submit to capture.

Biggles shouted to him to return and, without waiting to see if he obeyed, set to work to liberate the unfortunate German pilot, who was groaning in his seat. He derived some satisfaction from the knowledge that he was still alive, and with the assistance of the German observer, who came running up when he saw what was happening, they succeeded in getting him clear.

Wilkinson and another pilot came running down the hedge, having landed in the nearest suitable field when they saw the Camel crash.

"I thought you'd done it that time!" panted Wilkinson, as he came up.

“So did I!” admitted Biggles. “But I’ve bust my beautiful aeroplane; I’m afraid I shall never get another like it.”

“What the... Hallo, here comes Colonel Raymond,” said Wilkinson. “He must have been watching the show from the ground; and here’s the ambulance coming down the road. The sooner that high-flying pilot is in hospital the better; he’s got a nasty one through the shoulder.”

“Is the camera there?” cried Colonel Raymond, as he ran up, accompanied by two staff officers.

“Camera, sir? By Jove, I’d forgotten it!” replied Biggles. And it was true: in the excitement of the last few minutes all thoughts of the special object of his mission had been forgotten.

“Yes, here it is,” almost shouted the Colonel, tugging at something amongst the debris, regardless of the oil that splashed over his clean whipcord breeches. “That’s lucky—”

He stopped abruptly as several pieces of thick glass fell out of the wide muzzle of the instrument and tinkled amongst the splintered struts. He turned the heavy camera over and pointed accusingly at a round bullet-hole in the metal case, just opposite the lens.

“You’ve put a bullet right through it!” he cried.

Biggles stared at the hole as if fascinated. “Well, now, would you believe that?” he muttered disgustedly. “And they took five years to make it!”

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THE PRIZE

THE BOYISH face of the Hon. Algernon Lacey wore a remarkable expression as its owner walked in long strides towards the officers' mess from the direction of the squadron office. He hesitated in his stride as MacLaren, the doughty Scots flight-commander, emerged from his hut, cap in hand and stared thoughtfully at the sky.

"Hi, Mac!" hailed Algy. "Have you seen Biggles anywhere?"

"Aye, he's in the billiards-room."

"Thanks!" Algy hurried on, entered the mess, crossed the ante-room, and pushed open the door of the room in which a small billiards-table had been installed, to find Biggles sitting in a cane chair with his feet resting on the window-still, a small circle of officers around him.

"Hi!" cried Algy. "I've some news that will shake you!"

"You may have news, but I doubt if it will shake me," rejoined Biggles. "I've been in this perishing war too long for anything to cause me either surprise or consternation. What is it? Has Fishface decided to stand us a dinner?"

Fishface was the popular name for Brigadier-General Tishlace, general officer commanding the Wing in which Squadron No. 266 was brigaded.

"No," replied Algy. "At least, not so far as I know. But Wat Tyler has just shown me tonight's orders— they're being typed now. We've been detailed for a week's propaganda work. Several other units have got to do it, too, I believe."

"Propaganda?"

"Yes. You know the game—dropping leaflets over the other side of the Line, telling Huns that they're losing the war, and if they like to be good boys and give themselves up what a lovely time they'll have in England!"

"Great Scott! What will they want us to do next? Do they think we're a lot of unemployed postmen?"

"It's no joking matter," answered Algy seriously. "D'you know what the Huns do to people they catch at this game?"

"No. But I can guess."

"It's either a firing-party at dawn, up against a brick wall, or the salt mines in Siberia!"

"Then, obviously, the thing is not to get caught."

"You've said it," observed Mahoney. "I had to do this job once when I was in 96 Squadron. We didn't go far over the Line, I can tell you; in fact, Billy Bradley dropped a load only about two miles over. There was a dickens of a wind blowing at the time and it blew the whole lot back over the aerodrome. It looked as if the whole blooming Army had been having a paper-chase."

"How do you drop 'em?" asked Biggles curiously.

"They're done up in bundles, with an elastic band round them. You just pull the band off and heave the whole packet over the side. They separate as they fall, and you get an effect like an artificial snowstorm at a pantomime."

"Well," declared Biggles, "I don't mind a rough-house once in a while, but I'd hate to dig salt in Siberia. I never did like salt, anyway. When do we start this jaunt?"

"Tomorrow morning."

The door was flung open, and Wilkinson—better known as "Wilks", of the neighbouring S.E.5 Squadron—entered and broached the object of his visit without delay.

"I hear you blighters have been detailed for this paperchase tomorrow?"

"So Algy says," replied Biggles. "Why, what do you know about it?"

"We've been doing it for the last three days."

"The dickens you have!"

"We have. And we're pretty good at it!"

"How do you mean, good? It doesn't strike me that it needs any great mental effort to throw a bundle of papers over the side of an aeroplane. Still, it's the sort of thing your crowd might easily learn to do quite well."

“Don’t you make any mistake! Headquarters usually has a job to make people go far over the Line, but we’re doing the job properly. I dropped a load over Lille yesterday.”

“Lille! But you don’t call that far. It’s only about ten miles!”

“It’s far enough, and farther than you Camel merchants are likely to go!”

Biggles rose slowly to his feet. “We’ll see about that!” he declared. “I should say that where a palsied, square-faced S.E. can go, a Camel should have no difficulty in going. In fact, it could probably go a bit farther. In order to prove it, tomorrow I shall make a point of heaving a load of this confetti over Tournai.”

“You’re barmy!” jeered Wilks. “How are you going to prove you’ve been there, anyway?”

“If you’re going to start casting nasturtiums at my integrity I shall have to take a camera—”

He broke off, and with the other officers rose to his feet as Colonel Raymond, of Wing Headquarters Intelligence Staff, entered the room with Major Mullen, the C.O..

“Good-morning, gentlemen!” said the Wing officer. “All right, sit down, everybody. What were you talking about, Bigglesworth? Did I hear you say you were going to heave something at somebody?”

“Yes, sir,” replied Biggles. “Wilks here—Wilkinson —says he dropped a packet of these—er—propaganda leaflets over Lille yesterday. Just to show that there is no ill-feeling I said I’d drop a load over Tournai.”

“Tournai! It’s a long way—about thirty miles, I should say, for a guess. I’d be glad to see you do it, but it’s taking a big risk.”

“No risk at all, sir. I thought it might be a good thing if we set Wilks and his S.E.5 people a mark to aim at. Shackleton’s Farthest South sort of thing—or rather, Farthest East.”

Colonel Raymond smiled. "I see," he said slowly. "If your CO. has no objection I'll tell you what I'll do. I'll present a new gramophone to the squadron that takes a packet of those leaflets Farthest East during the next two days. Time expires—shall we say—at twelve noon, the day after tomorrow."

"That's very sporting of you, sir!" replied Biggles. "You might order a label made out to this squadron."

"You wait a minute," broke in Wilkinson. "Not so fast!" He turned to Colonel Raymond. "You make the label out to us, sir; it will save you altering it."

"I think I'll wait for the result first!" laughed the Colonel. "I shall expect a photograph for proof. I shall be outside, on the tarmac, at twelve o'clock the day after tomorrow, to check up. Good-bye!"

Biggles bent forward and peered through the arc of his whirling propeller for the fiftieth time and examined the sky carefully. Satisfied that it was clear he turned and looked long and searchingly over his shoulder. From horizon to horizon not a speck marked the unbroken blue of the sky.

He glanced at his watch and saw that he had been in the air rather more than an hour. Thirty minutes of it he had spent in climbing to his limit of height over his own side of the Lines, and for the remainder of the time he had pushed farther and farther into hostile country.

It was the day following the discussion in the mess, and, in accordance with his declared intention, he had left the ground shortly after dawn, bound for Tournai. So far he had been fortunate, for he had not seen a single machine of any sort. Even the archie had dwindled away as he had penetrated beyond the usual scene of operations.

Below lay a rolling landscape of green fields and woods, very different from that nearer the Lines. It was new to him, for, although he had been as far over on one or two previous occasions, it had not been in this actual area.

Again he peered ahead, and saw that his course had been correct. Tournai, a broad splash of grey, red, and brown walls, lay athwart the landscape like an island in a green sea. He wiped the frosted air from his windscreen, unwrapped a piece of chocolate from its silver jacket, popped it into his mouth, and once more began his systematic scrutiny of the atmosphere. The sky was still clear. "It looks as if it's going to be easy!" he thought, as he took a camera from the pocket in the side of his cockpit and placed it on his lap.

Then he groped under the cushion on which he sat and produced the object of the raid. It was a tightly packed wad of thin paper, not unlike banknotes, held together by an elastic band.

Once more he searched the sky. Satisfied that he had nothing to fear, he eased the control-stick forward for more speed and roared across his objective.

When he was slightly to the windward side of it he took his unusual missile from his lap, pulled off the elastic band, and flung it over the side.

Instantly the swirling slipstream tore the papers apart and scattered them far and wide.

By the time he had turned for home a multitude of what appeared to be small white moths was floating slowly earthward.

It was an extraordinary spectacle, and a smile came to his face as he watched it.

Then he turned to bring the sun behind him, aimed his camera at the scene below, and depressed the shutter release. He repeated the process, in case of an accident occurring to one of the plates, and then raced away towards the distant Lines.

Twenty minutes passed. Only half the distance had been covered, for he was now flying against a headwind. Nevertheless, he had just begun to hope that he would reach home without being molested, when a cluster of fine

dots appeared over the western horizon. The effect was not unlike a small swarm of gnats on a summer's evening. He altered his course slightly to make a detour round them, but continued to watch them closely. The speed with which they increased in size made it clear that the machines were travelling in his direction, and presently he could make them out distinctly.

It was a formation of six British bombers, D.H. Fours, being hotly attacked on all sides by some fifteen or twenty Albatros scouts. The D.H.'s seemed to be holding their own, however, and held on their way, flying in a tight V-formation.

The affair was nothing to do with Biggles; in any case he could not hope to serve any good purpose by butting in, although he wondered why no escort had been provided for the bombers, so he gave them as wide a berth as possible, hoping to pass unobserved. But it was not to be.

First one of the enemy scouts saw him, then another, until the air between him and the D.H. Fours was filled with a long line of gaudily painted aeroplanes, all racing in his direction.

"Those 'Four' pilots ought to be pleased with me," he thought bitterly, "for taking that mob off their heels. This is going to be awkward!"

The Albatroses were at about his own altitude. If anything, they were a trifle higher, which gave them a slight advantage of speed. To fight such a crowd successfully, so far from home, once they had drawn level with him was obviously impossible.

He was, as near as he could judge, still a good twelve miles over the enemy's side of the Lines; not a great distance as distance counts on the ground, but a long, long way when one is fighting against overwhelming odds.

He looked around for a cloud in which he might take cover, or around which he might dodge his pursuers, but in all directions the sky was clear. He scanned the horizon anxiously, hoping to see some of the scouts of his own side

with whom he could join until the danger was past; but the only British machines in sight were the fast disappearing D.H. Fours.

The nearest Albatros was less than a quarter of a mile away. Once it caught him he would be compelled to stay and fight, for to fly straight on would mean being shot down like a sparrow.

"Well, I'll get as near to home as I can before we start," he thought, pushing the control-stick forward. The note of the engine, augmented by the scream of the wind round wires and struts, increased in volume as the Camel plunged downwards.

Biggles flew with his head twisted round over his shoulder, watching his pursuers, and as the leader drew within range he kicked the rudder-bar and threw the Camel into a spin, from which he did not pull out until he was as near the ground as he dare go.

He came out facing the direction of the Lines, and although the Albatroses had spun with him, as he knew they would, he managed to make another two or three miles before they came up to him again.

The combat could no longer be postponed, yet if he stayed to fight so far from home, the end was inevitable. However many machines he shot down, in the end his turn would come, for the longer he fought, the more enemy machines would arrive. A large field lay almost immediately under him, and a little farther on he saw an aerodrome, and an idea flashed into his head, although he had no time to ponder on it.

The vicious rattle of a machine-gun reached his ears, warning him that the Hun leader was already within range. He jerked the control-stick back and sideslipped earthwards, imitating as nearly as he could the actions of a pilot who had been badly hit. Would it work? He could but try.

Following his plan, he swerved low over the treetops, throttled back, and ran to a standstill at the far side of the big field, after steering an erratic course. Then he sagged forward in the cockpit and remained still.

Out of the corner of his eye he watched the many-hued torpedo-like Albatroses circling above him. An orange-coloured machine, the one that had fired at him, detached itself from the others and glided down to land. One by one the remainder turned over the hedge and made for the aerodrome, from which a party was no doubt on its way to take charge of the wounded "prisoner".

Biggles sat quite still, with his engine idling, as the orange Hun taxied towards him. At a distance of about twenty yards the pilot stopped, switched off his engine, jumped to the ground, and walked quickly towards the Camel.

Biggles waited until only half a dozen paces divided them, then sat upright. The German stopped dead as he found himself staring into the smiling face of the British pilot, obviously undecided whether to go on or go back. Like most pilots he was probably unarmed, but Biggles was taking no unnecessary risks. His plan had so far succeeded, and he lost no time in carrying it to completion. He raised his hand in salute to the astonished German, blipped his engine derisively, and then sped away across the turf.

He cleared the hedge, tore across the German aerodrome with his wheels only a foot or two from the ground, and still keeping as low as possible, set his nose for home. On the far side of the aerodrome he saw the German pilots, who had left their machines, running back to them, and others taxiing to get head into wind; but he was not alarmed. In the minute or two that would elapse before they could take up the trail again he would get a clear lead of two miles, a flying start that the Germans could never make up.

And so it transpired. The Camel came under a certain amount of rifle fire from the troops on the ground, both in the reserve trenches and the front Line, but as far as Biggles knew not a single bullet touched the machine.

Ten minutes later he landed at Maranique, where the C.O. and several officers were apparently awaiting his return.

Major Mullen threw a quick glance over the Camel as Biggles climbed out, camera in hand. "You didn't have much trouble, I see!" he observed.

"No, sir," replied Biggles coolly. "I didn't find it necessary to fire a shot."

"Did you get your photo?"

"I think so, sir. I should like it developed as soon as possible. Wilks might like to have a copy of it."

"Here's a letter for you from Wilks," said Wat Tyler, passing him a large, square envelope. "A motor-cyclist brought it to the Squadron Office just after you took off."

Biggles looked at the envelope suspiciously, tore it open, and from it he withdrew a whole-plate photograph. It was an oblique picture, and showed a fairly large town; but it was half obscured by what seemed to be hundreds of small white specks that ran diagonally across it, just as his own leaflets had appeared above Tournai. A frown creased his forehead. "Can anybody recognise this place?" he said sharply.

Major Mullen took the photograph, looked at it for a moment, and then turned it over.

"Ah!" he said. "I thought so! It's Gontrude taken from 18,000 feet. He must have taken the photograph yesterday, after he left here."

"Where's Gontrude?" asked Biggles slowly. "I don't remember ever seeing it."

"No, it's rather a long way over," replied Major Mullen with a curious smile. "It's about twelve miles the other side of Tournai, I fancy."

Biggles staggered back and sat down suddenly on a chock. "Well, the dirty dog!" he exclaimed. "So I've been all the way to Tournai for nothing!"

"It rather looks like it," agreed the Major sympathetically.

"So Wilks thinks he's being funny, does he?" muttered Biggles. "Well, we shall see! There's another day left yet!" He strode off towards the mess.

Later in the day he called Algy over to him. "Look, laddie," he said, "I've been exercising my mental equipment on this crazy long-distance stunt, and the points that stick out most clearly in my mind are these: First of all, if it goes on, somebody's going to get killed; it's asking for trouble. Secondly, we can't let Wilks and his crowd get away with it. Hitherto, we've always managed to put it across them, so if they pull this off they'll crow all the louder. If they get the gramophone they'll play it every guest night, and everyone for miles will know what it means. I made a mistake in telling Wilks that I was going to Tournai, because then he knew just how far he had to go to beat me. The way I see it is this. It's no use doddering about just going another five miles, and another five miles, and so on. Apart from anything else, it's too risky. We've got to do one more show, and it's got to be such a whizzer that Wilks will never suspect it. At the same time it's no use risking running out of petrol on the wrong side of the Lines—that would be just plain foolishness."

Algy looked at him knowingly.

"You've got an idea under your hat," he said shrewdly. "What is it? Come on, cough it up!"

"You're right," admitted Biggles. "I have. I'm thinking of going to—come here." He caught Algy by the arm and whispered in his ear.

Algy started violently. "You must be off your rocker!" he exclaimed. "You'd run out of petrol for a certainty. The only way you could possibly do it would be by taking straight off

over the Lines without climbing for any height, and then the Huns would see to it that you didn't get there. No—"

"Shut up a minute," said Biggles, "and let me say my little piece! D'you suppose I haven't thought of all that? I'm out to put it across Wilks, but I've no intention of having my bright young life nipped in the bud for any measly gramophone. To start on such a show by flying low over the lines would be like putting your head into the lion's mouth and expecting it not to bite. The higher the start, the better. The danger lies near the lines—not fifty miles beyond them, where they'd no more expect to see a Camel than a brontosaurus. I should climb to 18,000 feet over this side, while it's still dark, so that I couldn't be seen, and aim to be forty miles over the other side by the time it began to get light. It would be a thousand to one against meeting a Hun there, particularly at that height, and it's unlikely that I should be spotted from the ground."

"But if you had to climb to that height at the start you wouldn't have anything like enough petrol to—"

"Wait a minute—let me finish. That's where you come in!"

Algy frowned. "Me!" he exclaimed. "So I'm in this, am I?"

"You wouldn't like to be left out, would you?" murmured Biggles reprovingly.

Algy regarded him suspiciously.

"Go ahead!" he said. "What do you want me to do?"

At eleven-thirty the following morning the aerodrome at Maranique presented an animated appearance, for rumours of the contest had leaked out and pilots had come from nearby squadrons to see the conclusion.

The S.E.5 pilots of 287 Squadron were there in force, as was only to be expected.

Major Mullen, looking a trifle worried, was talking to Colonel Raymond, who had just arrived in his car.

Wilks had not yet turned up, and Biggles was conspicuous by his absence, a fact which caused a good

deal of vague speculation, for although certain other officers had aspired to win the prize in the earlier stages of the contest, they had soon abandoned their ideas before the suicidal achievements of the two chief participants, Biggles and Wilks.

Algy came out of the mess and made his way towards the crowd on the tarmac, to be bombarded with the question: "Where's Biggles?" He looked tired, and there was a large smear of oil across his chin. He turned a deaf ear to the question.

"Where have you been?" asked an S.E.5 pilot suspiciously.

"What's that got to do with you?" retorted Algy. "Where's Wilks, anyway?"

As if in answer to the question, all eyes turned upwards as an S.E.5 roared into sight over the far side of the aerodrome; it pulled up steeply into a spectacular climbing turn, side-slipped vertically, and made a neat tarmac landing.

Wilks, his face beaming, stepped out holding in his hand a sheet of paper, which, as he approached, could be seen to be a photograph. He walked straight up to Colonel Raymond, saluted, and handed the photograph to him.

"That's my final entry for the competition, sir," he announced.

The Colonel returned the salute, and looked at the photograph.

"Where is this?" he asked.

"Mons, sir."

A cheer broke from the S.E.5 pilots, for at that period of the war Mons was between fifty and sixty miles inside German-occupied territory.

"Well, that will take some beating," admitted the Colonel, amid renewed cheers. He looked around the sky. "Where's Bigglesworth?" he said.

As a matter of fact, Biggles was not quite sure himself. He knew vaguely, but cloud interference had blotted out the earth, and although he caught occasional glimpses of it from time to time he had found it impossible to pick up the landmarks he had followed on the outward journey.

As in the case of his raid on Tournai, he had reached his objective with ridiculous ease, and had turned his back on it half an hour previously; but against the everlasting prevailing west wind he was still, according to his reckoning, some forty miles from the Lines.

That they were likely to prove the hardest part of his trip he was well aware, for even if his presence over the objective had not been reported to German headquarters by ground observers, his passage would have been noted by hostile air units, who would climb to the limit of their height to await his return.

He had realised that this was inevitable, and although he had given the matter a lot of thought he was still unable to make up his mind whether it would be better to stay where he was—at 18,000 feet—or go right down to the ground and hedge-hop home, when there might be a chance of evading the watching eyes above; although what he gained on the swings he was likely to lose on the roundabouts, for at a very low altitude he would come under the fire of all arms—machine-guns, anti-aircraft guns, flaming onions, and even field-guns.

He peered ahead through his centre-section struts with searching intensity and drew a deep breath. Far away—so far that only the keenest eyes could have detected them—were three groups of tiny black specks. They stretched right across his course, and not for an instant did he attempt to delude himself as to what they were. So far from the Lines they could mean only one thing—hostile aircraft; German scouts in formation.

He moistened his lips, pushed up his goggles, and looked down. It was the only way. Quickly but coolly he made up his

mind, and acted. He retarded his fine adjustment throttle, and as the noise of the engine died away he deliberately allowed the machine to stall, at the same time kicking on right rudder.

The Camel needed no further inducement to spin. In an instant it was plunging earthward, rotating viciously about its longitudinal axis—the dreaded right-hand spin that had sent so many Camel pilots to their deaths.

But Biggles knew his machine, and although he was temporarily out of control he could recover it when he chose.

He allowed the spin to persist until the fields below became a whirling disc; then he pulled out and spun in the reverse direction.

The spin was not quite so fast, but he pulled out feeling slightly giddy, and flew level, to allow his altimeter to adjust itself; for in his rush earthwards he had overtaken it, losing height faster than the needle could indicate it.

“Six thousand!” he muttered.

In a minute of time he had spun off twelve thousand feet of height.

He warmed his engine again, sideslipping as he did so in order to continue to lose height. The wind howled through his rigging, and a blast of air struck him on the right cheek. He tilted the machine over to the right, control-stick right over, applying opposite rudder to keep his nose up and prevent the machine from stalling.

These tactics he continued until he was less than a hundred feet from the ground; then, with throttle wide open, he raced tail up for the Lines, leaning far back in the cockpit to enable him to command a wide view overhead.

A cloud of white smoke, from which radiated long, white pencil-lines, blossomed out in front of him, and he altered his course slightly.

“Dash it!” he muttered. It was no time for half measures. Lower and lower he forced the Camel until his wheels were

just skimming above the ground. Only by flying below the limit of the trajectory of that gun could he hope to baffle the gunners.

On, on between trees and over scattered homesteads he roared in the maddest ride of his life. Cattle stampeded before him, poultry flapped wildly aside, and field labourers flung themselves flat before the demon that hurtled towards them like a thunderbolt. All the time he was getting nearer home, raising his eyes every few seconds to watch the enemy machines overhead.

Five minutes passed—ten—fifteen, and then a grim smile spread over his face.

“They’ve spotted me!” he muttered. “Here they come!” He glanced at his watch. “About five miles to go. They’ll catch me, but with luck I might just do it!”

A wide group of many-hued shark-like bodies was falling from the sky ahead of him, but he did not alter his course a fraction of an inch, although he flinched once or twice as he tore past flashing wings. He heard the rattle of guns behind him, but he did not stop to return the fire.

“Out of my way!” he snarled, as a fresh formation appeared in front of him. “Turn, or I’ll ram—oh!” He caught his breath as an Albatros shot past, its nose missing him by inches.

A bunch of Fokker triplanes tore into his path, but as if sensing the berserk madness of the lone pilot, they prudently swung aside to let him through.

He tilted his wing to enable him to clear a church spire that suddenly appeared and then twisted violently the other way to avoid a tall poplar. He snatched a swift glance behind him, and his eyes opened wide.

“What a sight!” he gasped. “Well, come on, boys; I’ll take you for a joyride!”

A sudden hush fell on the crowd on the tarmac at Maranique as the drone of a Bentley rotary engine was

borne on the breeze, and all eyes turned upwards to where a Camel could be seen approaching the aerodrome.

Over the edge of the aerodrome the engine choked, choked again, and backfired. The prop stopped, and the nose of the machine tilted down. The watchers held their breath as it became apparent that the Camel was in difficulties. A long strip of fabric trailed back from a wing-tip, and a bracing wire hung loose from the undercarriage. One of the ailerons seemed to be out of position, as if it was hanging on by a single hinge.

There was silence as the pilot made a slow, flat turn, that brought him into the wind, the machine flopping. A few feet from the ground the pilot caught it again and bounced to a bumpy landing.

A sigh of relief, like the rustle of dead leaves on an autumn day, broke from the spectators as the tension was relaxed.

Algy had started running towards the machine, but pulled up as Biggles was seen climbing from the cockpit. In his hand he carried a camera. A mechanic of the photographic staff ran out to meet him as if by arrangement, and relieved him of the instrument. Biggles walked slowly on towards the group, removing his cap and goggles as he came. He was rather pale, and looked very tired, but there was a faint smile about the corners of his mouth. He changed his direction slightly as he saw Colonel Raymond, and made towards him.

"Sorry, sir, but I shall have to keep you a minute or two until my photograph is developed," he said. "But I've still got another quarter of an hour or so, I think?"

The Colonel looked at his wrist-watch. "Fourteen minutes," he said. Then his curiosity overcame him. "Where have you been?" he inquired, with interest.

"I should prefer not to say, sir, if you don't mind, until the photo arrives."

"Just as you like."

Ten minutes passed by slowly, and then Flight-sergeant Smyth appeared, running towards the crowd with a broad smile on his face. He handed something to Biggles, who, after a swift glance, passed it to the Colonel.

"Where is this?" said the staff officer, with a puzzled expression. "I seem to recognise those buildings."

"Brussels, sir."

"Brussels?" cried Wilks. "I don't believe it! You couldn't carry enough petrol to get to Brussels and back!"

"Whether he could or not, this is a photograph of Brussels," declared the Colonel, "And there are leaflets fluttering down over the Palais Royal. I can see them distinctly."

A yell from the Camel pilots split the air, while the S.E. pilots muttered amongst themselves.

"But how on earth did you do it?" cried the C.O. in amazement.

"Ah, that's a trade secret, sir!" replied Biggles mysteriously. "But I am going to tell you, because it is only fair to Lacey, whose assistance made it possible. We flew over together, and landed in a field about forty miles over the Lines. He carried eight spare tins of petrol—four in his cockpit and four lashed to his bomb-racks. He came back home; I refuelled and went on. I had just enough petrol to get back, as you saw."

"But that isn't fair!" muttered Wilks.

"Oh yes it is!" said the Colonel quickly. "There was no stipulation about refuelling."

"Do we get the gramophone, sir?" asked Biggles.

"You do!" replied the Colonel promptly, and he handed it over.

Wilks' face broke into a smile, and he extended his hand. "Good show, Biggles!" he said. "You deserve it!"

"Thanks!" acknowledged Biggles. "How about you and your chaps coming over to dinner tonight? We'll have a

merry evening, with a tune on the jolly old gramophone to wind up with!"

For a moment Wilks looked doubtful, as though the mention of the gramophone gave him a nasty taste in the mouth. Then Biggles saw a sudden gleam flash into his eyes and a smile break out on his face.

"Right-ho!" said Wilks. "We'll be along. Thanks very much!" He swung away in the direction of his S.E., followed by the rest of his squadron.

"H'm!" grunted Biggles, as he watched him depart. "If I'm not mistaken, you mean mischief. I'll have to keep an eye on you, my lad!"

When Wilks turned up for dinner that night, only half his squadron's pilots were with him.

"Hallo!" said Biggles, as Wilks and his comrades walked into the ante-room, where the newly won gramophone was playing a lively tune. "Where are the rest of your chaps? We expected you all!"

"They couldn't get away," explained Wilkinson.

"Hard luck!" said Biggles. "Can't be helped, I suppose. Well, come along—dinner's ready." And he led the way into the mess.

Dinner was a merry affair. It seemed as though the visiting pilots were out to prove that no trace of soreness remained over their defeat in the gramophone contest. Good-natured banter was exchanged, and the room was in a constant uproar of laughter.

It seemed to Biggles that at times the laughter of the S.E.5 pilots was a trifle forced—as if they were deliberately making a noise to drown other possible noises, and he chuckled inwardly. And he chuckled still more when he noticed Wilks taking furtive glances at his wrist-watch.

Suddenly Wilks noticed that Algy was not present, and he asked after him.

"Oh," said Biggles casually, "he's got a stunt on. I—"

He broke off as a sudden uproar came from the anteroom, and, pushing back his chair, he leapt for the door. Thrusting it open, he dashed out into a group of figures milling round the gramophone.

In the midst of the group was Algy, gallantly defending the gramophone, holding off the S.E.5 pilots who had failed to turn up for the dinner.

“Two-sixty-six to the rescue!” yelled Biggles, dashing into the fray.

In a moment the affair was over as the other pilots of No. 266 Squadron dashed in.

“So that was Algy’s stunt!” said the crestfallen Wilks bitterly.

“It was!” grinned Biggles. “And it’s the winner. It’s no good, laddie,” he added. “If you want a new gramophone you’ll have to buy one. We won this, and we’re jolly well keeping it!”

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HUMBUGS

THE AERODROME of 266 Squadron was deserted, except for a slim figure that sat, rather uncomfortably, on an upturned chock, as a Sopwith Camel, considerably damaged, landed and taxied up to the hangars. Officers and air mechanics were in their respective messes eating the midday meal.

Biggles, the pilot of the Camel, alighted slowly and deliberately. He removed the tangled remains of a pair of goggles from his head, shook some loose glass from creases of his flying jacket, and eyed a long tear in the arm of the garment dubiously. Then he bent and examined the sole of his flying-boot, the heel of which appeared to have been dragged off. Apparently satisfied with his inspection, he took a soiled handkerchief from his pocket and carefully wiped a quantity of black oil from the lower part of his face. This done, he thrust the handkerchief back in his pocket and glanced sideways at Algy Lacey, who had deserted his seat in front of the sheds, and was inspecting the much-shot-about aeroplane from various angles.

"You seem to have been having some fun," suggested Algy.

"Fun, eh?" grunted Biggles, pointing to the shot-torn machine. "If that's your idea of fun, it's time you were locked up in a padded cell!"

"All right, don't get the heebie-geebies !"

"You'd have the screaming willies—never mind the heebie-geebies—if you'd been with me this morning. Where's everybody?"

"At lunch."

"That's all some people think of. If they'd do less guzzling and more—but why talk about it? Come on, let's go! I'll ring Smyth from the mess to get busy on this kite."

"Where've you been? You seem peeved about something," observed Algy, as they made their way to the dining-room.

"If thirty Huns wouldn't peeve anybody, I should like to know what would!"

"Hallo, Biggles!" called Mahoney, from the lower end of the long trestle-table. "Where've you been?"

"Ah, here's another wants to know all about it!" replied Biggles, "All right, I'll tell you. I'm going to knock the block off that hound Wilkinson!"

"All right—all right, don't get het up! What's he done now?"

Biggles seated himself with slow deliberation, ordered cold beef from the mess waiter, and reached for the salad. He selected a tomato and stabbed it viciously. A small jet of pink spray squirted from it and struck MacLaren, the Scots flight-commander, in the eye.

MacLaren rose wrathfully to his feet, groping for his napkin. "Here, what's the big idea?" he spluttered.

"Sorry, Mac," murmured Biggles apologetically. "But how did I know it was so juicy?"

"Well, look what you're doing!"

"Right-ho! As I was saying—where did I get to? Oh, yes! Well, this morning, on my way out to the Line, I thought I'd drop in and have a word with Wilks and thank him for sending down that bunch of records for the new gramophone. When I got there I found them all in a rare state.

"It seems that the old Boelcke 'circus', which has been away down south for the Verdun show, has come back, and planted itself right opposite Wilks' crowd, and they don't think much of it. Wilks said it was about time the Boelcke crowd had their wings clipped, and I told him that the sooner he got on with the clipping the better. There was nothing to stop him going right ahead. He turned all nerky

and asked why we didn't do something about it, and so on, and so forth.

"To cut a long story short, he suggested that I should do the decoy act for them. The idea was to rendezvous over Hamel at ten-thirty, me at twelve thousand feet, and all the S.E.s they could muster at eighteen thousand. I was to draw the Albatroses down and the S.E.s would come down on top of them. Wilks was particularly anxious to have a crack from up top at the new fellow who is leading the Albatroses—they don't know his name. That was about ten o'clock, and I, like a fool, said 'O.K.' and pushed off.

"Well, I got up to twelve thousand over Hamel, as arranged, and hung about until I saw nine S.E.s high up pushing into Hunland. I followed them, keeping underneath, of course. I found the Boche circus all right, or, at least, they found me—put it that way! I don't know how many there were, but the sky was black with 'em. However, I thought I'd do the job properly, so I headed on towards them as if I was blind.

"The Huns didn't waste any time. No, sir! They came buzzing down as if I was the only Britisher in the sky, and every one was full-out to get to me first. It tickled me to death to think what a surprise-packet they'd got coming when old Wilks and his mob arrived. I looked up to see where Wilks' lot were, and was just in time to see them disappearing over the horizon.

"That stopped me laughing. At first I couldn't believe it, but there was no mistake. The S.E.s just went drifting on until they were out of sight. And there was me, up Salt Creek without a paddle. I'd aimed to bring the circus down, and I'd succeeded. Oh, yes, there was no doubt about that! There they were, coming down like a swarm of wasps that had been starved for a million years! There I was, and there was the circus! But having got 'em, I didn't know what to do with 'em, and that's a fact!"

"What did you do with them?" asked Batson eagerly. He had only recently joined the squadron.

"Nothing," Biggles said. "Nothing at all. Don't ask fool questions. I came home," he went on, "and I didn't waste any time on the way, I can assure you. I went back to Wilks' place. Don't ask me how I got there because I don't know. I half-rolled most of the way, I admit, but the main thing was I got there. And what do you think I found? No, it's no use guessing—I'll tell you. I found Wilks and his crowd in the mess playing bridge—playing bridge! Can you beat that? He looked surprised when I barged in, as well he might, and then had the cheek to say he thought I meant that the show was to be done tomorrow."

"What about the S.E.s you saw?" asked Mahoney.

"It wasn't them at all. It was 311 Squadron, who are just out from England, going off on escort duty to meet some 'Fours' that had gone over on a bombing raid. They didn't know anything about me, of course, but when they got back they sent word to Wing Headquarters that they saw a Hun flying a Camel. They were sure it must have been a Hun, because they saw it fly straight up to the Boche formation. I was the poor boob they saw, and if that's their idea of joining a formation I hope they never join one of ours."

"But what did Wilks say about it?"

"He laughed—they all did—and said he was sorry. Then he had the nerve to suggest that I stayed to lunch. I told him that I hoped his lunch would give him corns on the gizzard, and then I pushed off back here."

"What are you going to do about it?" asked Algy.

"I don't know yet," replied Biggles slowly. "But it'll be something, you can bet your life on that!"

For the next hour Biggles sat on the verandah, contemplating the distant horizon. Then a slow smile spread over his face. He rose to his feet and sought Algy, whom he found at the sheds making some minor adjustments to his guns.

"Algy !" he called. "Come here! I want you. I've got it."

"Got what?"

"The answer. I'm going to pull old Wilks' leg so hard that he will never get it back into its socket, and I want your help."

"Fine! Go ahead! What do I do?"

"First of all, I've got to get Wilks out of the way this afternoon for as long as possible; that is, I want to get him off the aerodrome. You know Wilks has a secret passion for those big lumps of toffee with stripes on."

"Stripes on?"

"Yes, you know the things I mean—you get 'em at fairs and places."

"You mean humbugs?"

"That's it—humbugs. Wilks has eaten every humbug for miles. What I want you to do is to ring up Wilks and tell him that you've discovered a new shop in Amiens where they have some beauties—enormous ones, pink, with purple stripes. Lay it on thick. Make his mouth water so much that he slobbers into the telephone. Tell him you've got a tender going to Amiens this afternoon, and would he like to come?"

"If he says yes, as I expect he will, tell him to fly over here right away, but he'd better not tell anyone where he's going, as you're not supposed to have the tender. I'll fix up the transport question with Tyler. You take Wilks to Amiens. If you can find a shop where they sell humbugs, well and good. If you can't you'll have to make some excuse—say you've forgotten the shop. Keep him out of the way as long as you can, and then bring him back here. He'll have to come back here, anyway, to collect his machine."

"And what are you going to do?"

"Never you mind," replied Biggles. "But tell me, has 91 Squadron still got that Pfalz Scout on their aerodrome—the one they forced to land the other day?"

"I think so; I saw it standing on the tarmac there a couple of days ago as I flew over."

“Fine! That’s all I want to know. You go and ring up Wilks and get him down to Amiens. Don’t say anything about me. If he wants to know where I am you can say I’m in the air, which will be true.”

“Good enough, laddie!” said Algy. “I’d like to know what the dickens you’re up to, but if you won’t tell me, you won’t. See you later.”

It was well on in the afternoon when a mechanic who was snatching forty stolen winks on the shady side of the hangars of 287 Squadron happened to open his eyes and look upwards. He started violently and looked again, and was instantly galvanised into life.

He sprang to his feet and sprinted like a professional runner towards a dugout by the gunpits, yelling shrilly as he went. His voice awoke the dozing aerodrome and figures emerged from unexpected places.

Several officers appeared at the door of the mess, and after a quick glance upwards joined in the general rush, some making for the dugout and others for the revolving Lewis gun that was mounted on an ancient cartwheel near the squadron office.

A medley of voices broke out, but above them a more urgent sound could be heard, the deep-throated song of a fast-moving aeroplane.

The cause of the upheaval was not hard to discover. From out of a high, thin layer of cloud had appeared an aeroplane of unmistakable German design; it was a Pfalz Scout. And it was soon apparent that its objective was the aerodrome.

Like a falling rocket the machine screamed earthwards. It flattened out some distance to the east of the aerodrome, tore across the sheds at terrific speed, and then zoomed heavenward again, the pilot twisting his machine from side to side to avoid the bullets that he knew would follow him. But his speed had been his salvation, for he was out of range before the gunners could bring their sights to bear.

As the machine disappeared once more into the cloud whence it had so unexpectedly appeared, two or three officers began running towards their machines. But, realising that pursuit was useless, they hurried towards the spot where a little crowd had collected.

"What is it?" cried one of them.

"Message," was the laconic reply. "I saw him drop it."

The speaker tore the envelope from the streamer to which it was attached and ripped it open impatiently. His face paled as he read the note.

"It's Wilks," he said in a low voice. "He's down— over the other side! The Huns got him over Bettonau, half an hour ago—got his engine. By the courtesy of the C.O. of the Hun squadron where they have taken him, he has sent this message to say that he is unhurt, and would like someone to bring him over a change of clothes. He says he can have his shirts and pyjamas and pants—anything that we think might be useful. If someone will drop them on the Boche aerodrome at Douai they will be handed to him before he is sent to the prison camp tonight."

Parker, a pilot of Wilks' flight, claimed the honour.

"Wilks was my pal," he insisted, "and this is the least I can do for him. I'll make a parcel of his small kit and all his shirts and things and drop them on the airfield at Douai right away. Poor old Wilks!"

Sadly the speaker departed in the direction of Wilkinson's quarters, and half an hour later, watched by the sorrowful members of the squadron, the S.E. departed on its fateful journey.

Meantime, the pilot of the Pfalz Scout was not having a happy time. Twice he was sighted and pursued by British scouts, and although he managed to give them the slip, he was pestered continually by antiaircraft gunfire, for his course lay, not over the German Lines, as one might have supposed, but behind the British Lines.

Finally, the black-crossed machine reached its objective, and started a long spin earthward, from which it did not emerge until it was very close to the ground in the immediate vicinity of Mont St. Eloi, the station of 91 Squadron.

The Pfalz made a couple of quick turns and then glided between the sheds of the aerodrome, afterwards taxiing quickly towards a little group of spectators.

The pilot—Biggles—switched off and climbed out of his cockpit, removing his cap and goggles as he did so. Lee, a junior officer in the Royal Naval Air Service uniform, broke from the group and hurried to meet him. “What’s the game, Bigglesworth?” he said shortly. “You told me you only wanted to have a quick flip round the aerodrome. You’ve been gone more than half an hour.”

“Have I? Have I been away as long as that?” replied Biggles in well simulated surprise. “Sorry, old man, but I found the machine so nice to fly that I found it hard to tear myself out of the sky.”

“There’ll be a row, you know, if it gets known that you’ve been flying about over this side of the Line in a Hun machine. Besides, you must be off your rocker. I wonder our people didn’t knock the stuffing out of you!”

“They did try,” admitted Biggles. “But, really, I was most anxious to know just what a Pfalz could do. All our fellows ought to fly a Hun machine occasionally. It would help them to know how to attack it.”

“Perhaps you’re right—but it would be thundering risky!”

“Yes, I suppose it would be,” admitted Biggles. “But look here—in case there’s a row, or if anyone starts asking questions about your Pfalz, I should be very much obliged if you’d forget that anyone has borrowed it. In any case, don’t, for goodness’ sake, mention my name in connection with it!”

“Right you are!” grinned Lee. “Where are you off to now? Aren’t you going to stay to tea?”

"No, thanks—I must get back. I've got one or two urgent things to attend to. Cheerio, laddie, and many thanks for the loan of your kite!"

With a parting wave, Biggles walked across to his Camel, took off, and set his nose in the direction of Maranique.

He was comfortably seated in the ante-room, when, an hour later, a tender pulled up in front of the mess. Algy and Wilkinson, both apparently in high spirits, got out. Glancing in through the window, they saw Biggles inside, and entered noisily.

"What do you think about this poor boob?" began Wilks good-humouredly. "He rang me up this afternoon to say that he was going to Amiens, and asked if I would like to come. He told me he knew of a shop where they sold the biggest humbugs in France, and then when we got to Amiens he couldn't remember where it was!"

"Yes, wasn't it funny?" agreed Algy. "My memory is all going to pieces lately!"

"It's caused by castor oil soaking through the scalp into the brain!" declared Biggles. "I've been like that myself. The best thing is to take a pint of petrol night and morning every day for a week and then apply a lighted match to the tonsils."

"Oh, shut up! Don't be a fool!" laughed Wilks. "What about coming over to our place for dinner? We've got a bit of a show on tonight. We should have some fun."

"That's O.K. by me!" declared Biggles.

"And me," agreed Algy. "What shall we do—go over by tender? We shan't be able to fly back anyway; it'll be dark."

"But I've got my kite here."

"Never mind; leave it here until the morning—it'll take no harm."

"Fine! Come on, then; let's go while the tender is still here."

The S.E. pilots of 287 Squadron were at tea when, shortly afterwards, Biggles, Wilks, and Algy entered the mess arm-

in-arm. There was a sudden hush as they walked into the room. All eyes were fixed on Wilkinson.

"Hallo, chaps," he called gaily. Then, observing the curious stares, he stopped dead and looked around him. "What's wrong with you blighters?" he said. "Have you all been struck with lockjaw?"

Parker, deadly white, crossed the room slowly and touched him gently on the chin with his finger.

"What's the idea?" demanded Wilks, in amazement. "Think you're playing tag?" He turned to Biggles. "Looks like we've come to a madhouse," he observed.

"Is it you?" said Parker, in an awed whisper.

Wilks scratched his chin reflectively. "I thought it was," he said. "It is me, Biggles, isn't it?"

"Absolutely you and nobody else," declared Biggles.

"Come on, then, let's go through to my room and have a wash and brush up."

Wilks led the way along the corridor and pushed open the door of his room, only to stagger back with an exclamation of alarm. "My hat!" he shouted. "We've been burgled! Some skunk's pinched my kit!"

Biggles and Algy looked over his shoulder. The room was in disorder. Drawers had been pulled out and their contents scattered over the floor. The lid of a uniform-case stood open, exposing an empty interior. The room looked like the bedroom of an hotel that had been hurriedly evacuated. Wilks continued to stare at it incredulously.

"No," said a small, nervous voice behind them, "it wasn't burglars—it was me."

"You!" gasped Wilks. "What do you mean by throwing my things all over the floor? What have you done with my pyjamas, anyway? And where are my shirts, and—"

"I'm afraid your things are at Douai!"

"Douai!" Wilks staggered and sat down limply on the bed. "Douai?" he repeated foolishly. "What in the name of sweet glory would my clothes be doing at Douai? You're crazy!"

"I took them."

Wilks swayed and his eyes opened wide. "Do I understand you to say you've taken my clothes to Douai? Why Douai? Couldn't you think of anywhere else? I mean, if you'd wanted a joke you could have thrown them about the mess, or even out on the aerodrome! But Douai—I suppose you really mean Douai?"

Wilks looked from Biggles to Algy and back again to Biggles. "Can you hear what he says?" he choked. "Did you hear him say that he'd taken my kit to— Douai?"

"When you were a prisoner," explained Parker.

Wilks closed his eyes and shook his head savagely. "I'm dreaming!" he muttered. "You didn't by any chance see anybody dope that lemonade that I had in Amiens this afternoon, did you, Algy?"

"No," replied Algy. "I didn't, but I don't trust—"

"But a Hun dropped a message to say that you were a prisoner and wanted your kit!" explained Parker. "Didn't he, chaps?" he called loudly to the officers who were now crowding into the corridor.

"But I haven't been near the Lines!" protested Wilks. "Much less over them. Come here, Parker, and tell me just what happened."

As quickly and concisely as possible Parker narrated the events of the afternoon.

"The skunks!" grated Wilks. "They must have got hold of my name somehow and planned some dirty trick. It's just like them. This business isn't finished yet—Hallo, what's that?" He sprang to his feet as the roar of an aero-engine vibrated through the air.

"That's no S.E.!" he muttered, staring at the others.

"By gosh, it isn't!" cried Biggles. "It's a Mercedes engine, or I've never heard one. Look out, chaps, it's a Hun!" Without waiting for a reply, he darted towards the door.

Sharp yells of alarm came from outside, and the staccato chatter of a machine-gun split the air.

For a minute or two pandemonium reigned as people rushed hither and thither, some for shelter and others for weapons, but by the time they had reached them the danger had passed. A Pfalz Scout was disappearing into the distance, zig-zagging as if a demon was on its tail.

A hundred yards away a large, dark round object was bounding across the aerodrome. A mechanic started towards it, but Wilks shouted him back.

"Keep away from that, you fool!" he bellowed. "Stand back, everybody!" he went on quickly, throwing himself flat. Biggles and Algy lay beside him and watched the object suspiciously.

"I'm taking no risks!" declared Wilks emphatically. "I wouldn't trust a Hun an inch. It's some jiggery-pokery, I'll be bound. Keep down, everybody! That thing'll go bang in a minute, but I'll settle it!"

He jumped up and sprinted towards the nearest machine-gun. Reaching it and taking careful aim he sent a stream of tracer bullets through the small, balloon-like object.

It rolled over and jumped convulsively, but nothing else happened. He fired another burst.

Again the object rolled over. A cheer broke from the spectators, in which Wilks joined.

"I'll make quite sure of it!" he cried, and emptied the remainder of a drum of ammunition into it. *Rat-at-at-at-at—rata-rata-rata-rata!* The object twitched and jerked as the hail of lead struck it.

"All right, I think it's safe now!" he went on, advancing slowly. Several of the watchers rose and followed him to where it lay, smoking at several jagged holes where the bullets had struck it. An aroma of singeing cloth floated across the aerodrome.

A low, strangled cry came from Parker, but no one noticed it.

"What the dickens is it?" muttered Wilks curiously. He stooped over the bundle and, with a sharp movement of his penknife, cut the cords that held it together.

It burst open, disclosing what appeared to be a number of old pieces of rag. Wilks picked up one of them and held it in the air. It was a piece of blue silk, punctured with a hundred holes, some of which were still smouldering.

"Why, it looks like a pyjama jacket, doesn't it?" he said smiling. "It would be a joke if we've shot some poor chap's pyjamas to rags. Yes, they're pyjamas all right," he went on slowly, turning the rag round and round. "By gosh, they're *my* pyjamas!" His voice rose to a bellow of rage. He flung the tattered debris of the garment on the ground and stamped on it.

"Wait a minute, here's a note!" shouted Parker. He picked up a mangled piece of paper and smoothed it out on his knee. "It's in English, too! Listen! 'From Jagdstaffel Commander, Douai. Message not understood. No Captain Wilkinson at Douai. Have made enquiries at other units, but no explanation received. Thinking mistake has been made, kit is returned with compliments.'"

"But how did he know the clothes were for me?" demanded Wilks.

"Because I put a note in addressed to you," replied Parker.

Wilks looked down at the mutilated remains of his underwear, and then started. His gaze ran over the assembled S.E.5 pilots, a new suspicion dawning in his eyes.

"By James, I've got it!" he exploded. "Young Algy Lacey rang me up and asked me if I liked humbugs. He said he knew where there were some! He was right—he did! And so do I—now. Where is he, by the way, and that skunk Biggles?" He glanced around swiftly.

"They were here a moment ago," ventured someone.

"I saw them hurrying towards the road," said another.

There was a wild rush towards the main road that skirted the aerodrome. Far away a tender was racing down the long, white, poplar-lined highway, leaving a great cloud of dust in its wake.

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THE TURKEY

BIGGLES stood by the ante-room window of the officers' mess with a coffee cup in his hand and regarded the ever-threatening sky disconsolately.

It was Christmas-time; winter had long since displaced with fogs and rains the white, piled clouds of summer, and perfect flying weather was now merely a memory of the past. Nor did the change of season oblige by providing anything more attractive or seasonable than dismal conditions. A good fall of snow would have brightened up both the landscape and the spirits of those who thought that snow and Yuletide ought always to go together.

But the outlook from the officers' mess of No. 266 Squadron was the very opposite of what the designers of Christmas cards imagine an appropriate setting for the season.

"Well," observed Biggles, as he looked at it, "I think this is a pretty rotten war. Everything's rotten. The weather's rotten. This coffee's rotten—to say nothing of it being half-cold. That record that Mahoney keeps playing on the gramophone is rotten. And our half-baked mess caterer is rotten—putrid in fact!"

"Why, what's the matter with him?" asked Wat Tyler, the recording officer, from the table, helping himself to more bacon.

"Tomorrow is Christmas Day, and he tells me he hasn't got a turkey for dinner."

"He can't produce turkeys out of a hat. What do you think he is—a magician? How can —"

"Oh, shut up, Wat. I don't know how he can get a turkey. That's his affair."

"You expect too much. You may not have realised it yet, but there's a war on!"

Biggles eyed the recording officer sarcastically.

"Oh, there's a war on, is there?" he said. "And you'd make that an excuse for not having a turkey for Christmas dinner? I say it's all the more reason why we should have one. I'll bet every squadron on each side of the Line has got turkey for dinner—except us!"

"Well, you're a bright boy," returned Wat, "why don't you go and get one, if it's so easy?"

"For two pins I'd do it!" snorted Biggles.

"Fiddlesticks!"

Biggles swung round on his heel. "Fiddlesticks, my grandmother!" he snapped. "Are you suggesting I couldn't get a turkey if I tried?"

"I am," returned Wat. "I know for a fact that Martin has ransacked every roost, shop and warehouse for a radius of fifty miles, and there isn't one to be had for love or money."

"Oh," Biggles said. "Then in that case I shall have to see about getting one."

Algy caught his eye and frowned. "Don't make rash promises," he said warningly.

"Well, when I do get one you'll be one of the first to line up with your plate, I'll be bound," Biggles retorted. "Look here, if I get the bird, will you all line up very respectfully and ask for a portion—and will somebody do my dawn patrols for a week?"

There was silence for a moment.

"Yes, I will," declared Mahoney.

"Good! You can be getting a stock of combat reports ready," declared Biggles, turning towards the door.

"Where are you off to?" called Wat.

"Turkey hunting," replied Biggles shortly.

"And where do you imagine you are going to find one?"

"You don't suppose I'm going to stand here and wait for one to come and give itself up, do you? And you don't suppose I'm going to wander about this frost-bitten piece of landscape looking for one?"

"But I tell you, you won't find a turkey within miles!"

“That’s all you know about it!” grunted Biggles, and turning, slammed the door.

Now, at the beginning of that conversation Biggles had not the remotest idea of where he was going to start his quest for a turkey. But he had a vague recollection of seeing a large flock of turkeys below him on an occasion when he had been flying very low; and as he left the room to fulfil his rash promise he suddenly recalled where he had seen them.

He was half-way to the sheds when he called to mind the actual spot, and realised with dismay that it was over the other side of the Lines. He paused in his stride and eyed the sky meditatively. The clouds were low, making reconnaissance-flying quite useless, but there were breaks through which a pilot who was willing to take chances might make his way to the “sunnyside”.

Returning to the ground would be definitely dangerous, for if the pilot chose to come down through the clouds at a spot where they reached to the ground, a crash would be inevitable. But once in the air the clouds would present plenty of cover. It was, in fact, the sort of day on which an enthusiastic airman might penetrate a good distance into enemy territory without encountering opposition.

He went on thoughtfully towards the sheds. The farm on which he had seen the turkeys, he remembered, was close to a village with a curiously shaped church tower. It was, to the best of his judgment, between thirty and forty miles over the Lines, and provided that the clouds were not absolutely solid in that region he felt confident of being able to find it again.

But he had by no means made up his mind to go, for the project bristled with big risks. To fly so far over enemy country alone was not a trip to be lightly undertaken. And to land in enemy territory and leave the machine—as he would have to do—was little short of madness. Was it worth the risk?

He decided it was not, and was about to return to the mess when he was hailed by Algy and Mahoney, who had followed him up.

"Are you going turkey hunting in the atmosphere?" grinned Mahoney.

The remark was sufficient to cause Biggles to change his mind there and then, for he could stand anything except ridicule. "Yes," he said brightly. "They fly very high, you know—higher than you ever go. But I think I can manage to bag one."

"But you're not seriously thinking of flying?" cried Algy, aghast. "It's impossible on a day like this! Look how low the clouds are!"

"You'll see whether I am or not," muttered Biggles. "Smyth, get my machine out."

"But it —" began the N.C.O..

"Get it out—don't argue. My guns loaded?"

"Yes, sir."

"Tanks full?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then get her out and start up."

"He's as mad as a March hare," declared Mahoney hopelessly, five minutes later, as Biggles' Camel roared up into the moisture-laden sky.

"He is!" agreed Algy. "But it's time you knew him well enough to know that when he comes back he'll have a turkey with him—if he comes back at all. I wish I knew which way he'd gone. If I did I'd follow him to see that he doesn't get into mischief."

After climbing swiftly through a hole in the clouds Biggles came out above them at 5,000 feet, and after a swift but searching scrutiny of the sky turned his nose north-east. In all directions stretched a rolling sea of billowing mist that gleamed white in the wintry sun under a sky of blue.

North, south, east, and west he glanced in turn; but, as he expected, not a machine of any sort was in sight, and he

settled himself down to his long flight hopefully. The first difficulty, he thought, would be to find and identify the village or farm; the next would be to land in a suitable field near at hand without damaging the machine.

He realised that his greatest chance of success lay in the fact that the place was so far over the Lines, well beyond the sphere of the German aircraft and the German infantry who were holding, or were in reserve for, the trenches. To have landed anywhere near them would have been suicidal.

As it was, his objective was a remote hamlet where the only opposition he was likely to encounter on the ground was a farmer, or his men, although there was always a chance of running into stray German troops who were quartered or billeted well behind the Lines at rest camps or on the lines of communication.

"Well, it's no use making plans on a job like this," he mused. "Let's find the place and see what happens."

He glanced at his compass to make sure that he was on his course, and then at his watch, and noticed that he had been in the air for nearly twenty-five minutes.

"Almost there," he muttered, and began looking for a way down through the clouds. But in all directions they presented an unbroken surface, and rather than risk overshooting his objective he throttled back and with his eyes on the altimeter began gliding down through them.

He shivered involuntarily as the clammy mist closed about him and swirled around wings and fuselage like gale-blown smoke. Down—down—down; 3,000— 2,000—1,000, and still there was no sign of the ground.

At 500 feet he was still in it, but it was getting thinner, and at 300 feet he emerged over a sombre, snow-covered landscape. The country was absolutely strange to him, so he raced along just below the clouds, looking to right and left for a landmark that he could recognise.

For about five minutes he flew on, becoming more and more anxious, and was beginning to think that he had made

a big error of judgment when straight ahead he saw the dim outline of a far-spreading wood. He recognised it at once.

“Dash it! I’ve come too far,” he muttered, and, turning the Camel in its own length he began racing back over his course. “There must be a following wind upstairs to take me as far over as this,” he mused, as the minutes passed, and still he could see no sign of the village he sought.

He came upon it quite suddenly, and his heart gave a leap as his eyes fell upon the well-remembered farmhouse, with its rows of poultry houses. But where were the turkeys? Where was the flock of a hundred or more plump black birds that had fled so wildly at his approach on the last occasion? Then he understood.

“Of course I” he told himself savagely. “What a fool I am! They’re all dead by now. Plucked and hanging up in the Berlin poulterers’ shops, I expect. Ha!”

A sparkle came to his eyes as they fell on a great turkey cock, evidently the monarch of the flock, that had, no doubt, been kept as the leader of the next year’s brood. It was standing outside one of the houses, with its feathers puffed out, its head on one side, and an eye cocked upwards on the invader of its domain.

“Don’t stretch your neck, old cock; you’ll have a closer view of me in a minute,” mumbled Biggles, as he took a quick glance around to get the lie of the land.

The poultry coops were in a small paddock about a hundred yards from the farmhouse and its outbuildings, which, in turn, were nearly a quarter of a mile from the village. There were several fields near at hand in which an aeroplane might be landed with some risk, and as far as he could see, not a soul was in sight.

So much was he able to take in at a glance. There was no wood, or any other form of cover, so concealment was out of the question. The raid would have to be made in the open and depend entirely upon speed for its success.

“Well, it’s no use messing about,” he thought, and, cutting his engine, glided down into a long, narrow field adjoining the paddock. He had a nasty moment or two as the machine bumped over the snow-covered tussocks and molehills with which the pasture was plentifully besprinkled, but kicking on right rudder just before the Camel ran to a standstill he managed to swerve so that it stopped not far from the low hedge which divided the field from the paddock.

He was out of the cockpit at once, and, with his eye on the farm, ran like a deer towards the turkey, which still appeared to be watching the proceedings with the greatest interest.

It stood quite still until he was not more than ten yards away, but still on the wrong side of the hedge, and it was only when he began to surmount this obstacle that the turkey’s interest began to take the form of mild alarm.

“Tch—tch!” clucked Biggles gently, holding out his hand and strewing the snow with imaginary grains of corn. But the bird was not so easily deluded. It began to sidestep away, wearing that air of offended dignity that only a turkey can adopt; and, seeing that it was likely to take real fright at any moment, Biggles made a desperate leap.

But the turkey was ready: it sprang nimbly to one side, at the same time emitting a shrill gobble of alarm. Biggles landed on all fours in the sodden grass.

“I ought to have brought my gun for you,” he raged, “and then I’d give you something to gobble about, you scraggy-necked —”

His voice died away as he gazed in stupefied astonishment at a man who had appeared at the door of the nearest poultry house—which, judging by the fork he held, he had been in the act of cleaning.

If Biggles was surprised, it was clear that the man was even more surprised, and for ten seconds they stared at each other speechlessly. Biggles was the first to recover his

presence of mind, although he hesitated as to what course to pursue.

Remembering that he was in occupied Belgian territory, it struck him that the man looked more like a Belgian than an enemy.

"Are you German?" Biggles asked sharply, in French.

"No, Belgian," replied the other quickly. "You are English, is it not?" he added quickly, glancing apprehensively towards the farmhouse.

The action was not lost on Biggles. "Are there Germans in the house?" he asked tersely.

"Yes, the Boches are living in my house!" The Belgian spat viciously.

Biggles thought swiftly. If there were Germans in the house they would be soldiers, and, of course, armed.

At any moment one of them might look out of a window and see him.

"Why have you come here?" the Belgian went on, in a nervous whisper.

Biggles pointed to the turkey. "For that," he answered.

The Belgian looked at him in amazement. He looked at the bird, and then back at Biggles. Then he shook his head. "That is impossible," he said. "I am about to kill it, for it has been kept back for the German officers in the village."

"Will they pay you for it?" asked Biggles quickly.

"No."

"Then I will. How much?"

The Belgian looked startled. "It is not possible!" he exclaimed again.

"Isn't it?" Biggles cast a sidelong glance at the turkey, which, reassured by the presence of the owner, whom it knew, was strutting majestically up and down within three yards of them. He thrust his hand into his pocket and pulled out some loose franc notes, "Here, take this!" he said, and leapt on to the bird.

This time there was no mistake, and he clutched it in both arms. He seized the flapping wings and held them together with his left hand, taking a firm grip of the neck with his right.

“Come on, kill it!” he called to the Belgian. “I can’t!”

There was a sudden shout from the direction of the house and, looking up, he saw to his horror that a soldier in grey uniform was standing on the doorstep watching him. Again the call of alarm rang out and a dozen or more German troops—some half-dressed, others fully clad and carrying rifles—poured out.

For a moment they stood rooted in astonishment. Then, in a straggling line, they charged down into the paddock.

Biggles waited for no more. Ducking under the outstretched arm of the farmer, who made a half-hearted attempt to stop him, he scrambled over the hedge into the field where he had left the machine. His foot caught in a briar, and he sprawled headlong; but the bird, which he had no intention of relinquishing, broke his fall, and he was up again at once.

Dishevelled, and panting with excitement, he sped towards the Camel. Fortunately, the impact of Biggles’ ten stone weight as he fell seemed to have stunned the bird, or winded it; at any rate, it remained fairly passive during the dash to the machine.

As he ran, Biggles was wondering what he was going to do with the bird when he got to the machine, and blamed himself for overlooking this very vital question. With time he could have tied it up, but with the Germans howling like a pack of hounds in full cry less than a hundred yards away, there was no time for that.

He did the only thing possible. He slung the bird into the cockpit, and still holding it with his right hand climbed in after it. It was obvious at once that there was no room for both of them, for the cockpit of a Camel is small, and the turkey is a large bird.

At least, there was no room on the floor of the cockpit without jamming the control-stick one way or the other, which certainly would not do. The Camel was not fitted for side-by-side seating, so in sheer desperation he plonked the bird on to the seat and sat on it. He felt sorry for the bird, but there was no alternative, and he mentally promised it respite as soon as they got clear of the ground.

A rifle cracked perilously near, and another, so without waiting to make any fine adjustments, he shoved the throttle open and sped across the snow. It did not take him long to realise that he had bitten off rather more than he could chew, for the turkey was not only a large bird but a very strong one.

Whether it was simply recovering from the effects of the fall, or whether it was startled by the roar of the three hundred horse-power in the Camel's Bentley rotary engine, is neither here nor there; but the fact remains that no sooner had he started to take off than the bird gave a convulsive jerk that nearly threw him on the centre-section. "Sit still, you fool," he rasped. "Do you want to kill us both?" In sheer desperation he pulled the machine off the ground and steered a crazy course into the sky.

He breathed a sigh of relief as his wheels lifted, for he had fully expected his undercarriage to buckle at any moment under the unusual strain. The danger of the troops being past, he attempted to adjust himself and his passenger into positions more conducive to safety and comfort.

He groped for his belt, but quickly discovered that its length, while suitably adapted for a single person, was not long enough to meet round him in his elevated position. So he abandoned it, and keeping under the clouds, made for home, hoping that he would not find it necessary to fly in any position other than on even keel.

His head was, of course, sticking well up above the windscreen, and the icy slipstream of the propeller smote

his face with hurricane force. He tried to crouch forward, but the turkey, relieved of part of his weight, seized the opportunity thus presented to make a commendable effort to return to its paddock.

It managed to get one wing in between Biggles' legs and, using it as a lever, nearly sent him over the side; he only saved himself by letting go of the control-stick and grabbing at the sides of the cockpit with both hands. The machine responded at once to this unusual freedom by making a sickening, swerving turn earthwards, and he only prevented a spin, which at that altitude would have been fatal, by the skin of his teeth.

"Phew!" he gasped, thoroughly alarmed. "Another one like that and this bird'll have the cockpit to himself!" He brought the machine to even keel, at the same time taking a swift look around for possible trouble.

He saw it at once, in the shape of a lone Albatros scout that had evidently just emerged from the clouds, and was now moving towards him.

He pursed his lips, then automatically bent forward to see if his gunsight was in order.

Only then did he realize that he was much too high in his seat to get his eye anywhere near it. In a vain attempt to do this he again crouched forward, and once more the bird displayed its appreciation of the favour by heaving to such good purpose that Biggles was flung forward so hard that his nose struck the top edge of the windscreen. He blinked under the blow, and retaliated by fetching the cause of it a smart jab with his left elbow.

Meanwhile, the Hun was obviously regarding the unusual position and antics of the pilot with deep suspicion, for he half turned away before approaching warily from another direction.

"That fellow must think I've got St. Vitus' Dance," thought Biggles moodily, as the bird started a new movement of short, sharp jerks which had the effect of causing the pilot

to bob up and down and the machine to pursue a curious, undulating course. "I don't wonder he's scared!" he concluded. "Oh, help!"

The turkey had at last succeeded in getting its head free, and it raised it to a point not a foot from Biggles' face. The look of dignity it had once worn was now replaced by one of indignation. For a moment or two all went well, for the bird seemed to be satisfied with this modicum of freedom, and began to look from side to side at its unusual surroundings with considerable interest.

"Yes, my lad, that's a Hun over there!" Biggles told it viciously, as the Albatros swept round behind them. "If you start playing the fool again you're likely to be roasted in your feathers!"

Taka-taka-taka-taka!

Biggles saw that the Hun had placed himself in a good position for attack, and knew the matter was getting serious. He had no intention of losing his life for the sake of a meal, so he forthwith prepared to jettison his cargo—an action which had always been in the background of his mind as a last resort.

But, to his increasing alarm, he found that this was going to be a by-no-means-simple matter, and he was considering the best way of accomplishing it when the staccato chatter of machine-guns, now very close, reached his ears.

To stunt, or even return the attack, was out of the question, and now, thoroughly alarmed, he moved his body as far forward as possible in order to allow the bird to wriggle up behind him and escape. The turkey appeared to realise his intention, and began worming its way upward between his back and the seat.

Taka-taka-taka-taka-taka!

"Get out, you fool!" yelled Biggles, as he heard the bullets boring into the fuselage behind him; but either the bird did not understand or else it refused to accept his invitation, for it remained quite still. There was only one thing to do, and

he did it. He pulled the control-stick back and shot upwards into the clouds.

To climb right through them—a distance of perhaps several thousand feet—was, of course, impossible, for to keep the machine level in such conditions was out of the question. Still, he hung on until, finding himself becoming giddy, he dived earthward again, and looked anxiously for his pursuer as he emerged into clean air.

To his annoyance, he saw that the Hun was still there, about three hundred yards behind him.

In turning to look behind he had put his left hand on the bird, and as he turned once more he saw, to his horror, that his glove was covered with blood.

“I’ve been hit!” was his first thought.

Then he grasped the true state of affairs. No wonder the bird was quiet—it was dead. It had stopped a shot which in normal circumstances might have caught him in the small of the back.

The shock sobered him, but he found that it was a good deal easier to dispose of a dead bird than a living one. Twenty-odd pounds of dead weight was a very different proposition from the same weight of jerking, flapping, muscular life, and he had no difficulty in stowing it in the space between the calves of his legs and the bottom of the seat.

This done, he quickly buckled his safety-belt, and, turning to his attacker, saw, to his intense relief, that, presumably encouraged by his opponent’s disinclination to fight, the Hun was coming in carelessly to deliver the knock-out.

Biggles spun the Camel round in its own length and shot up in a climbing turn that brought him behind the straight-winged machine. That the pilot had completely lost him he saw at a glance, for he raised his head from his sights, and was looking up and down, as if bewildered by the Camel’s miraculous disappearance.

Confidently Biggles roared down to point-blank range. The German looked round over his shoulder at the same moment, but he was too late, for Biggles' hand had already closed over his gun-lever.

He fired only a short burst, but it was enough. The Albatros reared up on its tail, fell off on to a wing, and then spun earthwards, its engine roaring in full throttle.

Biggles did not wait to see it crash. He was more concerned with getting home, for he was both cold and tired. He found a rift in the clouds, climbed up through it, and, without seeing a machine of any description, crossed the Lines into comparative safety.

Judging the position of the aerodrome as well as he could he crept cautiously back to the ground, and landed on the deserted tarmac.

With grim satisfaction, he hauled the corpse of his unwitting preserver from the cockpit, and, flinging it over his shoulder, strode towards the mess.

Dead silence greeted him as he opened the mess door, and, still in his flying-kit, heaved the body of his feathered passenger on to the table. Then a babble of voices broke out.

Mahoney pushed his way to the front, staring. "Where on earth did you get that?" he cried incredulously.

"I told you I was going turkey hunting," replied Biggles simply, "and—well, there you are! Look a bit closer, and you'll see the bullet-holes. I don't like reminding you, old lad, but don't forget you're doing my early patrols next week. And don't forget I'm carving the turkey!"

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WAR IN HOT BLOOD

ALGY LACEY ran into the officers' mess and cast a swift, cautious glance round the room.

"Biggles is on the way here. He's in a blazing white-hot fury!" he said quickly. "Let him get it off his chest—ahem!" He broke off and reached for the bell as Biggles, the subject of his warning, kicked the door open and glared from the threshold. His face was dead white; his lips were pressed into a thin, straight line; his nostrils quivered. His eyes, half-closed, glinted as they swept over the assembled officers.

"You're a nice lot of poor skates," he observed, in a half-choked voice. "It's time some of us got down to a little war, instead of playing fool games like a lot of kids!"

"All right—pour yourself out some tea and get it off your chest," suggested MacLaren calmly. He had seen the symptoms before.

Biggles glared at him belligerently. He seemed to have difficulty in finding his voice.

"Where's Wilson?" asked Mahoney.

"Wilson's dead!" replied Biggles shortly. Wilson was an officer who had recently transferred to the squadron from a two-seater unit.

"How did it happen?"

"I don't know. I saw him going down in flames, but I didn't know whether it was Wilson or Lacey until I got back. Wilson was bound to get it sooner or later, the way he flew. He acted as if the sky was his own."

"Well, don't let it worry you!" muttered Mahoney.

"That's not worrying me. It was only —"

Biggles broke off, buried his face in his hands, and was silent for some seconds. Nobody spoke. Mahoney caught Algy's eye, and grimaced. Algy shrugged his shoulders. Biggles drew a deep breath, and looked up.

"Sorry, blokes," he said slowly, "but I'm a bit het up! Any tea left in that pot?"

Mahoney pushed the teapot towards him.

"You remember young Parker of Wilks' squadron?" went on Biggles.

"Yes. Nice lad! I always had an idea he'd do well. Got two or three Huns already, hasn't he?"

"He had," replied Biggles. "They don't count now. They got him—this afternoon—murdered him."

"What are you talking about?" Mahoney said tersely.

Biggles made a sweeping gesture with his hand. "Let me tell you," he said. "Listen here, chaps. I did the evening show today with Algy and Wilson. We worked round the Harnes, Annoeulin, Don area. Just before we got to Annoeulin I saw some S.E.s ahead —four of 'em. Presently I saw it was Wilks and his Flight, so we linked up. There was nothing doing for a long time, and I thought it was going to be a washout, when a great mob of Huns suddenly blew along from the direction of Seclin. We ought not to have taken them on. There were too many of 'em—but that's by the way. They were a new lot to me—Albatros D. Fives, orange with black stripes. It was a circus I've never seen before. Wilks turned towards them. I followed, and then I don't quite know what happened." Biggles paused and puckered his forehead.

"They were a pretty rotten lot, or none of us would have got back," he went on. "They flew badly, and shot all over the place. Two of 'em flew straight into each other. They struck me as being a new mob that had just come up from a flying school as a complete unit—except the three leaders, who, of course, would be old hands. They wore green streamers—at least, one of 'em did—the only one I saw. Did you notice anything, Algy?"

"I saw one with red streamers."

"I didn't. No matter. Towards the finish I saw Parker going down with a dead prop—looked to me as if it had

been shot off. Still, he was gliding comfortably enough, and was bound to land all right—over the German side, of course—when this Hun with the green streamers comes along, spots him, and goes down after him.

“There was no need for him to do it. Parker was going down a prisoner, anyhow. I’ll give Parker full marks; he put up a jolly good show, although he couldn’t do anything else but go down. He kept his eye on Green Streamers, and sideslipped from side to side so that he couldn’t be hit.

“No man worth a hang would shoot a fellow who was helpless and bound to be taken prisoner, whatever else happened. It isn’t done. But Green Streamers— whether because he was sore because he couldn’t hit him, or whether it was because he wanted a flamer to make his claim good, I don’t know—shot at Parker all the way down. Even then he couldn’t hit him, and Parker managed to make a landing of sorts in a stubble-field.

“I had to take my eyes off him then because a couple more were at me, but I happened to look down again just as Parker was climbing out of his machine, waving to let us know he was all right. Green Streamers, the skunk, went right down at him, and—and —” Biggles’ lips quivered, and the hand that held the teacup trembled.

“He shot him,” he went on, after a short pause. “Shot him to bits, in cold blood! I saw the bullets kick up the ground around him. Parker just grabbed at his chest, then pitched forward on to his face. I went at Green Streamers like a bull at a gate, but some of the others got in my way and I couldn’t reach him. Then I lost him altogether. I didn’t see him again.

“The Huns all made off, heading towards Seclin. I was so mad that I followed them to see where they lived, and, as I expected, they went down at Seclin, where the old Richthofen crowd used to be. I went down low on my way back and saw Parker lying just as he had fallen, with a lot of

German troops standing about. He was dead. There's no doubt of that, or they'd have moved him."

"The swine!" growled Mahoney. "What does Wilks say about it?"

"I don't know. I haven't seen him to speak to. Huns have done the same thing once or twice before, and they always make the same excuse—say that they thought the fellow was trying to set light to his machine. That doesn't go with me. Parker was, as I say, a prisoner, anyway. And I wouldn't shoot a Hun who was down over our side for trying to do what I should do myself, and —"

Biggles broke off as the door was flung open and Wilkinson, followed by half a dozen pilots of his squadron, entered. They were still in their flying kit, and had evidently come over by tender. Wilks' face was chalky white. His eyes blazed. He came to a halt just inside the room, and pointed at Biggles.

"You saw it, didn't you, Biggles?" he snapped, in a tense voice.

Biggles nodded.

"There you are, chaps!" went on Wilks, over his shoulder. He turned to Biggles again and jerked his thumb behind him. "They wouldn't believe me—said not even a Hun would do a thing like that!"

"Well, what about it?" asked MacLaren.

"This!" said Wilks, grimly. "I'm going to get that Hun with the green decorations on his struts. If someone else happens to be flying that machine it will be his unlucky day."

"Never mind Green Streamers," put in Biggles. "I'll bet he's told the rest of his crowd about it by this time, and they'll be laughing like hyenas. I say let's mop up the whole lot of 'em, good and proper! We can't have people like that about the place!"

"Good idea. But how?" asked Mahoney.

Biggles thought deeply for a moment.

"I'll tell you," he replied. "Sit down, you chaps," he added to the newcomers. "There was a time when people over here who flew behaved like gentlemen. But there has lately been a tendency towards the methods of the original Huns, and I say it's up to us to put the blighters where they belong. Let's keep our department of this confounded war clean or life won't be worth living.

"For a start, we'll deal with this orange-and-black lot of tigers. But don't forget this. It's no use our going on as we have been working. If we do, our patrols will meet this crowd and get the worst of it. They've taken to flying together, while we go on flying in bits and pieces, in twos and threes. That's no use—it won't get us anywhere.

"If everyone is willing let's get together and make a clean job of it. I should say there are thirty machines in that new Hun group—three *staffels*. It's no earthly use three of us taking on that crowd, but if we put up all our machines together—say two complete squadrons, eighteen machines or thereabouts—it will be a different proposition."

"What's the debate?" Major Mullen, the C.O., with Major Benson, of 301 Squadron, entered the mess and looked around curiously.

Briefly, Biggles told him of the affair of the afternoon and the drastic steps he was going to suggest to him in order to make their displeasure known to the orange *staffels*.

"But if you start cruising about, eighteen strong, you don't suppose you will ever get near the Huns, do you?" asked Major Mullen. "Small patrols are their meat."

"I've thought of that, sir," replied Biggles. "We shall have to use cunning, that's all. The Hun hasn't much imagination, but he's a very methodical bloke, and it's on that score that I propose to get him going. Tomorrow morning, at the crack of dawn, I shall go over and shoot up Seclin."

"Alone?"

"If necessary, or with two other officers, if they'll come. I don't want anybody detailed for the job; I'd ask for

volunteers."

"I'll come," put in Algy quickly, and Mahoney held up his hand.

Several other officers stepped forward.

"That's enough," declared Biggles. "You can't all come. Now, this is my idea. Tomorrow morning three of us will shoot the spots off Seclin aerodrome. The next morning, at exactly the same time, we'll do it again. After the second show, it will occur to the Huns that these dawn shows are going to be a regular institution, and they'll decide to do something about it.

"On the third morning we shall go over as usual, and the Hun, unless I am very much mistaken, will be up topsides bright and early, waiting for us. As it happens, we shall not be alone. The three machines will fly low, as usual, but six more Camels will be at, say, six thousand. The Huns may see them; in fact, I hope they do, because they'll think it's the escort, and not bother to look any farther. They won't see nine S.E.s up at twelve thousand, waiting for the show to begin before they come down. They won't hear them because they'll be in the air, and the noise of their own engines will settle that.

"So, when the show begins, there will be eighteen of us on the spot, and the Hun will find he is up to the neck in the gravy. That's how I hope we shall wipe these blighters and their perishing aerodrome off the map. Anybody else got any ideas?"

There was no response to the question.

"That's fine, then," went on Biggles. "One last thing, though. If we succeed in pushing these blighters into the ground—and we certainly shall—I suggest that we go straight away and strafe their sheds. That will be the finishing touch—make a clean job of it, so to speak."

The C.O. thought for a moment. "I've no objection," he said. "As a matter of fact, we shall probably profit by it in the end, because if we don't do something of the sort the

Huns, by working together, will be certain to cause casualties amongst small patrols and individual pilots."

"Grand! I feel better now," declared Biggles. "We'll get out times and rendezvous later on. We'll start the action tomorrow, Tuesday, which means that the big show will be on Thursday. Now I'm going to have a bath."

It was still quite dark when Biggles' batman called him the following morning. Biggles sat up in bed, gulped down the proffered tea, and shivered.

"Have you called Captain Mahoney and Mr. Lacey?" he inquired.

"Yes, sir; they're both dressing."

Biggles crawled out of bed as the batman withdrew.

"The number of times I've said that I'd never volunteer for any more of these cock-crow shows— and here I am at it again," he grumbled. "Grrrr."

He pulled his sheepskin thigh-boots on over his pyjamas, donned a thick, high-necked woollen sweater, and then his leather flying-coat. He adjusted his flying-helmet, leaving the chin-strap flapping, and slipped his goggles over it. Then he walked through to the mess to drink another cup of tea and munch a biscuit while he waited for the others.

Mahoney and Algy followed him into the mess most immediately, and in reply to his terse: "If you're ready we'll get off," followed him to the sheds, whence came the roar of engines being run up.

All was still on the aerodrome. A faint flush was stealing across the eastern sky, and the stars began to lose their brightness.

"You lead," said Biggles, looking at Mahoney. "If I were you I'd go straight over, keeping low all the way. When we get there we'll do three circles to the left and then hit the breeze for home, rallying on the way. We'll pull our bomb-toggles for four bombs first time, four the second time, and use our guns the third time. How's that?"

“Sounds all right to me,” said Mahoney. “Come on!”

The three pilots climbed into their seats, ran up their engines to confirm that they were giving their full revs, waved away the chocks, and then took off straight across the aerodrome without troubling to taxi out, for there was not a breath of wind.

Keeping low, they raced across the British trenches at a hundred feet, startling the troops, and made a beeline for their objective. It took them exactly ten minutes to reach it, after crossing the Lines. As it came into sight Mahoney, in the lead, edged a little to the right, and then tore straight at the line of camouflaged canvas hangars.

The aerodrome was deserted. Not a soul or an aeroplane was to be seen. The only sign of life was a small party of crows just in front of the German sheds.

Biggles followed Mahoney in his downward rush at an interval of perhaps twenty yards. Algy brought up the rear. As Biggles reached for the bomb toggle he saw several people, obviously in night attire, run out of the huts that stood just behind the hangars, and throw themselves flat. He waited until the first hangar came in line with the junction of his starboard wing and fuselage, and then pulled.

He saw Mahoney's bombs burst in quick succession as he zoomed upwards, taking a nasty bump from his leader's slipstream as he did so. Banking left, and glancing back over his shoulder, he saw figures running. A great cloud of smoke concealed the buildings, so it was impossible to see what damage had been done.

A long stream of tracer bullets leapt upwards from a point near the edge of the aerodrome, but Biggles only smiled. Still keeping in line, the three Camels swung round into their previous tracks and swooped low over the drifting smoke cloud. Mahoney's four remaining bombs swung off the racks, and his own followed. He turned left again as the last one left his machine. This time he did not go entirely

unscathed, for several bullet-holes had appeared in his wings. He smiled again, and settled himself low in the cockpit for the final plunge.

All three Camels had zoomed to a thousand feet over the edge of the aerodrome, and now, as one machine, they banked steeply again and screamed down on the Boche sheds.

Biggles could see Mahoney's tracer bullets pouring into the smoke, for the target was no longer visible, and his hand groped for the gun lever.

A double stream of tracer bullets poured from the muzzle of his guns. He held the burst until his wheels were actually in the smoke, and then soared up in a climbing turn.

Algy roared up beside him, goggles pushed up, laughing. Mahoney was some distance ahead, but he throttled back to enable them to catch up, and in a tight arrow-head formation they made for home.

The return trip was uneventful although they came in for a good deal of attention from troops on the ground, as was only to be expected. Mahoney left the formation for a few moments to chase a staff car, returning after the panic-stricken driver had turned the vehicle over at the first bend. They reached Maranique just before six, having been in the air for under an hour.

"How did it go off?" called Wat Tyler from the squadron office as they passed it on the way to breakfast.

"Fine!" replied Biggles. "We just left our cards and came home!"

On Thursday morning, at a quarter to five, Major Mullen addressed eight other pilots in front of "A" Flight shed. A short distance away, nine Camels stood in readiness for the impending "show".

"I'll just run over everything once more, so that there can be no possibility of mistake. As you all know, one flight has already made two raids on the German aerodrome at

Seclin. The second raid, made yesterday morning, was carried out at exactly the same time and in the same way as the first one.

"Yesterday the enemy were ready—or perhaps it would be more correct to say nearly ready. They had their machines lined up on the tarmac, but were unable to get off in time to catch ours. It's hoped that they will actually be in the air this morning, awaiting a recurrence of the attack.

"Mahoney, Bigglesworth, and Lacey will fly low and raid the aerodrome as usual—at least, they will behave as if they were going to. Whether they do it or not depends on circumstances. It's the riskiest part of the show, but they insist on doing it, and as they are best qualified for the job, knowing the layout of the aerodrome intimately, I have agreed.

"I shall lead the remaining six Camels at six thousand feet. If the Huns are not in the air, we shall remain where we are, acting as escort to the lower formation. If, however, the Huns are in the air, they will attack the lower formation first, and we shall go to their assistance. The S.E.s, which will be flying above us, will immediately join issue.

"I want every officer to stand by and do his level best to destroy at least one enemy machine. You all know the reason for this attack, so I need not go into it again. Our ultimate object is the complete write-off of this particular German group. A red light will be signal to rally. That's all. Start up!"

Biggles threw his half-smoked cigarette aside and climbed into his seat. A savage exultation surged through him, for the next half-hour would see the culmination of his plan. Whether it would result in failure or success remained to be seen. The urge to fight was on him. More than anything else he wanted to see the machine with the green streamers.

The sudden bellow of an engine warned him that his leader was taking off. He waved away his chocks, and the

three Camels roared into the still air. They circled the aerodrome once to allow the other six machines to gain altitude, and then swung east on the course they had followed the two previous mornings.

They escaped the usual front line archie, for it concentrated on the higher machines, which offered an easier target, but they came in for a certain amount of trouble from rifles and machine-guns on the ground.

Biggles took a final glance round to see that all was in order. Twenty yards to the right he could see Algy's muffled profile, and to the front, the back of Mahoney's head. Looking backwards and upwards over his shoulder he could see the other six Camels following, but of the S.E.5s there was no sign, due, possibly, to the slight haze that still hung in the sky.

The objective aerodrome loomed up in the near distance, and Biggles, leaning far out of his cockpit, stared long and earnestly upwards. He closed his eyes for a moment, pushed up his goggles, and looked again, and a muttered exclamation broke from his lips when he saw what he had hoped to see—the entire German circus.

His plan for getting them in the air had worked, but a sudden feeling of anxiety assailed him as he counted their numbers. He made it twenty-nine the first time and twenty-eight the second. They were flying on a westerly course, and changed direction as he watched them.

"They've spotted us," he muttered.

Mahoney shook his wings, and Biggles smiled.

"All right, old son—I can see 'em," he murmured. "Here they come!"

The Huns were coming—there was no doubt of that —and to an inexperienced pilot the sight would have been an unnerving one. Like a cloud of locusts they poured through the sky, plunging downwards in a ragged formation towards the approaching Camels.

“Well, I hope those perishing S.E.s are on time,” was Biggles’ last thought as he swung out a little to allow Mahoney and Algy to manoeuvre without risk of collision. “What a mob! This looks like being a show and a half! I shouldn’t be surprised if somebody gets hurt.”

If the Huns felt any surprise that the three Camels should continue on their way in spite of the inspiring reception prepared for them, they did not show it. Straight down, at a terrific angle, they roared; in fact, so steeply did they dive that Biggles felt a thrill of apprehension lest they should ram them before they could pull out.

He stared at the Hun leader to see if he was wearing streamers, but from the angle at which he was approaching it was impossible to see if his wing struts carried them or not.

Where were the rest of the Camels and the S.E.s? Good! There were the Camels, cutting across at terrific speed to intercept the Huns, but there was no sign of the S.E.s. If they were late, even although it was only two minutes—

Biggles thrust the thought aside, put down his nose a trifle for speed, and then zoomed up to meet the attack. It was no use trying to keep in formation now.

The first casualty occurred before a shot had been fired. A Camel pilot of the top layer, seeing that he was in danger of colliding with a Hun, swerved to avoid him, and struck another, that he had evidently not seen, square in the side of the fuselage. Both machines disintegrated in a mighty cloud of flying debris.

A second Hun who was close behind swerved wildly to avoid them, but failed to do so. His wing struck the remains of his comrade’s machine; it broke in halves near the centre-section, and he, too, plunged earthwards. Three machines—two Huns and a Camel— were hurtling down to oblivion before the fight commenced.

As the first two collided Biggles shuddered involuntarily; he could almost sense the shock of the impact. But there

was no time for contemplation.

From such a cloud of machines it was hard to single out one for individual attack, but he saw an Albatros firing at him, and accepted the challenge. For a full minute they spun dizzily round each other, neither gaining an advantage, and then the Hun burst into flames.

Biggles was not shooting at the time, nor did he see the machine from which the shots had come to send the Boche to his doom. He turned sharply to the right and caught his breath, for it almost looked as if fighting was out of the question. The air was stiff with machines, diving, half rolling, and whirling around in indescribable confusion. It would need all the pilots' wits to avoid collision, much less take aim.

Another Hun was in flames, but still under control, with the pilot on his lower plane side-slipping downwards.

It seemed to Biggles that no one could hope to escape collision in such hopeless chaos. Machines of both sides hurtled past him at frenzied speed, sometimes missing him by inches. It was dodge and dodge again. Shooting was of the wildest snapshot variety.

Then, suddenly, the air seemed to clear, as if there were fewer machines than there had been. A Camel tore across Biggles' nose with an orange and black Hun on its tail. Biggles made a lightning turn to follow, saw the Camel burst into flames, fired and saw the Hun pilot sag forward in the cockpit. An orange wing spun upwards, and the torpedo-shaped fuselage dropped like a bomb.

A burst of bullets struck Biggles' machine somewhere just behind him, and he jerked the control-stick back into his stomach. A Hun shot past his wing-tip, so close that Biggles flinched.

"That's too close!" he muttered. "Where the dickens are the S.E.s?"

He could see some of the Albatroses turning away, as if they had had enough, and then out of the blue a cloud of

brightly coloured Fokker triplanes tore into the fight. The fleeing Albatroses turned again and headed back to the fight.

Biggles stared.

"My hat!" he ejaculated. "It's the Richthofen crowd. With the Baron himself!" he added, as his eyes fell on a blood-red triplane.

His mouth set grimly and he twisted to bring his sights to bear, but was forced to turn away as an orange Albatros shot across his path. It was followed by another with green streamers fluttering from its V-shaped interplane struts. He jerked his machine round spasmodically to follow, and saw that an S.E. was already pursuing it. It was Wilkinson's.

"Out of my way, Wilks!" yelled Biggles, completely carried away.

He saw the S.E. slip sideways to escape a burst of fire directed at it by the red triplane.

It left the way clear.

He crouched forward, peering through his gun-sights, saw the green streamers, and fired. The Albatros turned over and spun.

"No, you don't!" snarled Biggles. "You can't get away with that!"

His suspicion that the Hun was shamming was well founded, for after two or three spins the Boche recovered control and dived away.

But Biggles had followed him down. The Hun made a bad turn that almost caused him to stall, and for a couple of seconds Biggles had a "sitter". *Taca-taca-taca-taca!* stuttered his guns.

The Hun turned slowly over on its back, and, with the tell-tale streamers still fluttering in the slipstream, roared earthwards, black smoke pouring from its engine.

Biggles suddenly remembered the Richthofen circus.

"This looks like being a bad business," he thought. "The Huns outnumber us now by at least two to one."

He looked up, and a yell broke from his lips. A Bristol Fighter, with its gunner crouched like a monkey behind the rear gun, cut clean through the dog-fight. Another and another followed it—the air was full of Bristols.

“Gosh! It’s Benson and his crowd! He heard us discussing it, and decided to butt in at the death,” was the thought that flashed through Biggles’ mind.

Then he started and stared incredulously as an R.E.8 swam into view, heading for the thickest of the fighting, and three D.H.4’s suddenly appeared on the right.

“What the dickens is happening?” he muttered. “If this goes on much longer the whole blinking Flying Corps will be here!”

It was almost true. Machines of all types, two-seaters and scouts, seeing the fight from afar, decided to take a hand, but it was unquestionably the arrival of the Bristol Fighters at the crucial moment that saved the day. Shortly after their arrival there must have been at least a hundred machines engaged, and the Huns began to disappear like magic.

Presently all the machines that Biggles could see were British; the Huns had had enough.

Turning slowly, he looked around and saw a red Very-light flare sinking earthward; it was Major Mullen’s signal to rally. Looking up, Biggles saw him circling above and climbed up to join him. The Major did not wait, but set off towards the Lines, several Camels following in loose order.

Biggles landed and joined the C.O. on the tarmac.

“Did you ever see anything like that in your life, sir?” he cried, as he ran up. “If anybody asks me if I’ve been in a dog-fight I shall now be able to say ‘Yes’!”

Within ten minutes several Camels had landed and he knew there would be no more.

“What about this bombing trip?” he asked the C.O..

“Yes, we’re going to do it,” replied the Major. “All three squadrons are going to rendezvous over the aerodrome in

half an hour. Get filled up as fast as you can, everybody—petrol and ammunition.”

Thirty minutes later a mixed formation of Camels, S.E.5s and Bristol Fighters headed once more towards the scene of the great air battle.

The formation reached the aerodrome without opposition, and, diving low, laid their eggs. The Seclin aerodrome became a blazing inferno, although just how frightful was the damage inflicted was not revealed until a reconnaissance machine returned with photographs the following morning. Seclin aerodrome had been “written off”, as Biggles had planned.

“Well, that’s a bonnie picture!” observed Biggles next morning as he examined the photograph of the stricken aerodrome. “We said we’d wipe ‘em out, and, by gosh, we have! Wilks agrees that we have settled Parker’s account for him!”

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REPRISALS

ALGY LACEY had no intention of landing at Cassel when he took off on a short test flight, but after wandering aimlessly through the blue for some minutes and finding himself within easy distance of the aerodrome he decided he would drop in and leave his card at the mess of the new squadron—No. 301—that had recently arrived in France from England with its Bristol Fighters.

In accordance with the custom in vogue at the time he did not land immediately. For the honour and glory of the squadron to which he belonged he first treated any casual spectators of his arrival to a short performance in the art of stunting.

He pushed his nose down and roared low over the mess—so low that his wheels almost touched the roof, in order to indicate that his show was about to commence.

Thereafter, at various altitudes, he proceeded to put his machine through every evolution known to aviation. Loops, slow rolls, fast barrel-rolls, whip-stalls and Immelman turns followed each other in swift succession until, feeling slightly giddy, he decided he had done enough.

He cut out his engine, glided in between the hangars in a manner that effectually scattered his audience, then skidded round to a neat one-wheel, cross-wind landing, satisfied that he had upheld the tradition of No. 266 Squadron. He then taxied, tail-up, towards the sheds.

Only when collision with the line of machines on the tarmac seemed inevitable did he swing round and come to a stop, a bare ten yards from the assembled spectators.

Whistling happily, he leapt lightly to the ground, took off his cap and goggles, threw them into his seat, and, with a broad smile on his face, advanced towards the members of the new squadron.

One stood a little apart from the others, and at the expression on his face Algy's lost something of its gaiety and acquired a new look of faint surprise.

The isolated officer, whom Algy now observed wore on his arm the three stars of a captain, took a pace towards him. "Who are you?" he barked, in such a peremptory voice that Algy jumped.

The greeting was unusual, to say the least of it.

"Why—er—I'm Lacey, of No. 266," replied Algy startled.

"Say 'sir' when you speak to me! I am in command here during the temporary absence of Major Benson!"

"Sorry, sir!" replied Algy, abashed and not a little astonished.

"What do you mean by acting like a madman over my aerodrome?" the other demanded.

Algy blinked and looked helplessly at the other officers. "Not like a madman, sir, I hope!"

"Don't argue with me! I say your flying was outrageous—a wanton risk of Government property!"

"But I—"

"Silence! Consider yourself under open arrest! Report your name and unit to my office, and then return instantly to your own squadron. I shall refer the matter to Wing Headquarters. You will hear further from your own C.O.."

Algy stiffened and swallowed hard. "Very good, sir!" he ground out between his clenched teeth. He saluted briskly, reported to the squadron office as instructed, then returned to the tarmac.

Several officers regarded him sympathetically. One of them winked and inclined his head.

Algy halted near him. "What's the name of that dismal Jonah?" he asked softly. "And what's biting him, anyway? Has he had a shock of some sort, or is it just plain nasty-mindedness?"

"That's it—born like it! They must have fed him on crab apples when he was a kid. Watch out, though; he's acting

C.O..”

“What’s his name?”

“Bitmore.”

“He’s bit more than he can chew this time, and he’ll soon know it!” declared Algy. “Has he been to France before?”

“No.”

“Then how did he get those three pips on his sleeve?”

“Chasing poor little pupils round the tarmac at a flying-training school.”

“Well, this isn’t one, and he isn’t chasing me!” snapped Algy. “My crowd will soon show him where he steps off if he’s going to try being funny! The sooner some nice friendly Hun pushes him into the ground the better for everybody. Give your blokes my condolences. Cheerio!”

“Cheerio, laddie!”

Algy climbed into his machine, took off, and raced back to Maranique. He parked his Camel in its usual place in front of the sheds and marched stiffly towards the squadron office. On the way he met a party of officers, including Biggles and Mahoney, on their way to the hangars.

“Stand aside!” he said curtly as they moved to intercept him. “I’m under arrest.”

Biggles stopped dead. “You’re what?” he gasped.

“Under arrest.”

“Arrest my foot! What’s the game?”

“No game—it’s a fact. I went to call on No. 301 Squadron this morning—you know, the new crowd over at Cassel—and I gave them the once-over before I landed. When I got down a mangy skunk named Bitmore, who is acting C.O., dressed me down properly and put me under open arrest.”

“Your show must have given him a rush of blood to the brain.”

“Looks like it. Anyway, he’s reporting me to Wing.”

Biggles frowned and looked at Mahoney. “The scallywag!” he muttered. “What are we going to do about it? We can’t have blighters like this about the place. Life won’t be worth

living. Think of what the poor chaps in his own squadron must go through. Quite apart from ourselves, I think we ought to do something for them. If Mr. Bitmore is going to start chucking his weight about, it's time we did a bit of heaving ourselves!"

"Absolutely!" declared Mahoney.

"I tell you what," went on Biggles, and, drawing Mahoney to one side, he whispered in his ear. Then he turned again to Algy.

"All right, laddie," he said, "you had better go and report to Wat Tyler. You've had orders, and if you don't obey them it'll only make things worse."

Algy departed in the direction of the squadron office, while Biggles and Mahoney walked quickly back towards their quarters.

A couple of hours later two Sopwith Camels appeared over the boundary of 301's aerodrome at Cassel. To the officers lounging on the tarmac and in front of the officers' mess it was at once apparent that neither of the pilots was adept in the art of flying.

Twice they circled the aerodrome, making flat turns and committing every other fault that turns the hair of instructors prematurely grey. Twice they attempted to land. The first time they undershot, and, opening up their engines at the last moment, staggered across the front of the sheds, scattering the watchers far and wide and narrowly missing disaster.

The second time they overshot hopelessly, and, skimming the trees on the far side of the aerodrome, skidded round to land downwind. The spectators wiped the perspiration from their faces and groaned in unison, while the ambulance raced madly round, trying to anticipate the exact spot on which the crash would occur.

The first of the two machines made its third attempt to get in, and a cry of horror arose as the Camel drifted along

on a course in a dead line with the wind-stocking pole.

At the last moment the pilot appeared to see it, skidded violently, missed it by an inch, and flopped down to a landing that would have disgraced a first soloist. The second machine followed, grazing the mess roof, and together they taxied an erratic course almost up to the hangars.

The two pilots, clad in brand-new bright yellow flying coats and crash helmets, climbed out of their machines and approached the little crowd of officers and air mechanics who had collected to watch the fun.

Slightly in front of them Captain Bitmore stood waiting. He was in his element. Such moments were food and drink to his warped mentality. His taciturn face twisted itself into an expression in which disgust and rage were predominant. "Come here!" he snarled.

Obediently the two officers altered their course towards him.

"What do you call yourselves?" went on Bitmore, curling his lip into a sneer. "Pilots! Pilots, eh?" He choked for a moment, and then got into his stride with a harsh scornful laugh. "You're not fit to pilot a perambulator down a promenade, either of you. You're a disgrace to the Service! A steam-roller driver could have put up a better show! Never have I seen such a disgraceful exhibition of utter inefficiency, complete uselessness, and supreme inability! How and why you are still alive is a mystery to me, and the sooner you are put on ground duties the safer the air will be for other people who can fly! You make me—"

His voice trailed away to a silence that could be felt as the nearer of the two recipients of his invective slowly unfastened his flying-coat and took it off, disclosing the insignia of a full colonel. The other had followed his example, and stood arrayed in the uniform of a staff major.

The Colonel eyed the Captain with cold fury. "Have you quite finished?" he said, in a voice that made the spectators

shiver. "Because, if you have, I will begin. What is your name?"

"Bitmore, sir."

"Bitmore? Ah, I might have known it. I've heard of you for a useless, incompetent, incapable piece of inefficiency! Who is in command at this station?"

There was a titter from the other officers, but it faded swiftly as the Colonel's eye flashed on them.

"I am, sir. I am—"

"Silence! You dare to tell me that you are in command of a squadron, and take it upon yourself to criticise my flying! How long have you been in France?"

"Well, sir—"

"Don't 'well' me—answer my question!"

"Two days, sir."

"Aha! Two days, eh? No doubt you think that qualifies you to call yourself a war pilot—to question the actions of officers who have learnt their flying in the field. You dolt! You imbecile! You—" The Colonel choked for breath for a moment, and then continued.

"I called here for petrol, and this is the reception I get!"

"I'm sorry, sir!"

"You will be, I promise you! Get my tanks filled up, and have your mechanics clean both machines. Come along—jump to it! We've no time to waste!"

Captain Bitmore, ashen-faced, lost no time in obeying the order, and the mechanics needed no urging. With smiles they could not repress, the mechanics set about the machines, and in ten minutes the two Camels were refuelled. Their props, wings and struts were polished until they looked as if they had only just left the workshops of the makers, but not until they were completely satisfied did the Colonel and his aide-de-camp climb into their seats.

"I shall bear your name in mind," was the Colonel's parting shot at the discomfited Captain, as, with the Major in attendance, he taxied out and took off.

A quarter of an hour later both machines landed at Maranique. The two pilots leapt to the ground, and, to the great surprise of Flight-Sergeant Smyth, ran quickly round to the back of the hangars and then on to the officers' quarters. It struck Smyth, from their actions as they ran, that they were both in pain.

They were; but not until they were in Biggles' room and had discarded their borrowed raiment did the so-called staff officers give way to their feelings. Biggles lay on his bed and sobbed helplessly. Mahoney, with the major's jacket on the floor at his feet, buried his face in his hands and moaned weakly.

"Poor chap!" said Biggles, at last, wiping his face with a towel. "He'll never be able to live that down as long as he lives! Right in front of the whole blinking squadron, too! Still, it served him right."

"My word, if he ever finds out there will be a rare old stink!" declared Mahoney.

But nothing happened, and by the next evening the incident was half forgotten.

Two days later a middle-aged officer, with an imposing array of medal ribbons on his breast, landed at Maranique and walked briskly towards the squadron office.

Major Mullen, the commanding officer of 266 Squadron, was working at his desk, and looked up in surprise as the visitor entered. Then his face broke into a smile of welcome, and he sprang to his feet.

"Why, hallo, Benson!" he cried. "I'm glad to see you again! What brings you here?"

Major Benson shook hands warmly. "I'm back over here again now," he said. "Just brought out a new squadron—No. 301. We're at Cassel, just over the way, so I hope we shall be seeing something of each other. I've been on a few days' leave, and sent the squadron ahead of me in charge of Bitmore, my senior flight-commander. I only got back this

morning. I've brought a fine lot of chaps over, so I hope we shall do well."

"Good—I hope you will!"

"But that isn't really why I came to see you. My people had an unexpected visit from two Wing officers the other day—awful nuisance, these people. I happened to run into Logan last night. You remember Logan, of General Headquarters? Well, he happened to mention that they were making a surprise inspection of your station some time today, so I thought I'd give you the tip."

Major Mullen sprang to his feet.

"The dickens they are!" he cried. "Thanks very much, Benson. Dash them and their surprise visits. They think we have nothing else to do but sit and polish our machines all day, and sweep up the aerodrome. If everything isn't as clean as a new pin the squadron gets a black mark. It isn't the number of Huns one gets in this war," he added bitterly. "G.H.Q. knows nothing about that!"

Major Benson nodded sympathetically. "Don't I know it!" he said. "Well, I shall have to be getting back. No; I can't stay to lunch. I've a lot to do. Thanks all the same."

"I shall have to get busy myself to get things in order for this inspection," replied Major Mullen. "Goodbye, Benson, and thanks awfully for giving me the tip! I hope we shall be seeing you again soon. I should like your fellows to get on well with mine."

He lost no time in setting preparations on foot for the impending inspection.

Telephones rang, N.C.O.'s chased mechanics to various tasks, and all officers were ordered out of the mess to help clean their machines.

For two hours the aerodrome presented a scene of unparalleled activity, and by the end of that time everything was in apple-pie order. All ranks were then dismissed to their quarters, with orders to parade in twenty minutes, properly dressed, and in their best uniforms.

Biggles complained bitterly as he struggled with the fastenings of his collar. "Confound all brass-hats!" he snarled. "If I had my way—"

"All right! All right!" growled Algy. "Don't keep on about it! It only makes it worse."

With tightly laced boots and in well-brushed uniforms they took their places on the tarmac.

"Everybody will stand by until further orders!" called the C.O..

The officers took their places by their respective machines. The minutes rolled by. An hour passed slowly, and nothing happened. Two hours passed, and still there was no sign of the staff officers.

Biggles began to sag at the knees. "My hat!" he groaned. "I can't stand much more of this! Aren't we getting any lunch today, Mahoney?"

"The Old Man says no. The brass-hats might arrive at any moment, so we're to carry on until they come."

Slowly the afternoon wore on, but still there was no sign of the expected officers. Then, from a distance, came the drone of many aeroplanes flying in formation and the personnel of No. 266 Squadron stiffened expectantly.

"My word, they're doing the job properly!" muttered Algy to Biggles.

"Don't be a fool! Brass-hats don't fly!" snapped Biggles. "Look! What's this coming? What the—"

He broke off, staring unbelievably towards the far edge of the aerodrome as nine Bristol Fighters, flying very low in a beautiful tight Vee formation, swept into sight.

Straight across the aerodrome they roared. When they were about half-way, and immediately in front of the sheds, they dipped in ironical salute. A message streamer fluttered to the ground from the leading machine. Then they disappeared from sight beyond the hangars, and the drone of their engines was lost in the distance.

An air-mechanic raced out, picked up the message, and carried it to the puzzled C.O..

Under the curious eyes of the entire squadron he opened it. There was an extraordinary expression on his face as he looked up and called: "Captain Mahoney and Captain Bigglesworth, please come here! What do you make of that?" he went on curtly as he passed a sheet of paper.

They read it together:

"It is requested that Captains Mahoney and Bigglesworth be asked how they like their eggs boiled. For and on behalf of the officers of No. 301 Squadron, (Signed) A. L. BENSON, Major."

"What a put-over!" gasped Biggles, as understanding flashed to him.

"Come with me!" said the C.O. curtly, and led the way to the squadron office. "Now, gentlemen," he went on as he closed the door behind them, "kindly have the goodness to explain what all this is about."

Biggles acted as spokesman. Clearly and concisely he told the whole story, from Algy's reprimand by Captain Bitmore up to the masquerade, and the admonition of that officer.

The Major heard him out in silence. "Well," he said slowly, "there are two aspects to this situation. Major Benson has evidently discovered the plot, and he has taken the course that I, knowing him as an officer of the finest type, would expect. If he had reported the matter officially to headquarters I need hardly tell you that you would both have been court-martialled. As it is, he has taken an unofficial course to enable the squadron to get its own back. He has put it across us very neatly! At this moment every member of 301 Squadron is probably convulsed with mirth at our expense. We shall never hear the last of it. The joke has recoiled on us with a vengeance. What are we going—"

The door flung open, and Wat Tyler, the recording officer, dashed in. "Staff car just arrived, sir, with a full load of

officers from General Headquarters!" he gasped.

Major Mullen sprang to his feet. "Get back to your stations!" he shouted, making for the door.

Biggles gurgled with glee as with Mahoney at his side they dashed back to the sheds.

"What a fluke! What an absolute hummer!" he chortled. "It's a surprise inspection. Won't 301 be pleased when they hear about it. They've done us the finest turn they could possibly do for us—if they'd spent a year trying to work it out. The laugh will be on our side, after all."

An hour later the officers and mechanics of 266 Squadron were paraded in front of the sheds, and General Sir Martin Ashby, of the General Headquarters Staff, addressed them.

"It gives me great pleasure," he began in his stentorian voice, "to see a squadron in the field that can carry itself with such spotless efficiency. I have visited many units in the course of my duties, but never has it been my lot to find one in which such praiseworthy zeal is so obviously displayed by all ranks.

"Your equipment is a credit to yourselves, your commanding officer, and the Service as a whole. I shall make it my business to see that the magnificent example you have set is made known to every other squadron in France. So gratified am I to find that a unit in this command can maintain itself as I have always claimed that a squadron can be maintained, in spite of active-service conditions, that I shall cause these observations to be published tonight in R.F.C. orders, so that all other units on the Western Front may be aware of the pattern you have set. Thank you!"

Major Mullen's face wore a broad smile as he returned from seeing the officers on their way.

"What a slice of luck!" he laughed. "The squadron's reputation is now higher than it has ever been before, and the General has just told me that all requests from us will in

future receive his personal consideration. Applications for leave will receive priority.

“Yes, the laugh is certainly with us. What is more, I took the opportunity of mentioning Lacey’s little episode, and the General promised to put the matter right with Wing, which means that no further action will be taken in the matter, except that Captain Bitmore is likely to get a rap over the knuckles. In fact, everything seems to have panned out extremely well!”

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THE CHALLENGE

ONE DAY about the middle of June, during a brisk period of trench strafing, Biggles spotted a Boche two-seater making for home. It had evidently been over the British Lines, and was a good deal higher than he was, but there was a fair amount of cloud about and he thought there was a chance of stalking the enemy before he reached his aerodrome.

He at once gave chase, but, to his chagrin, the Boche — which turned out to be a Roland two-seater fighter— although he had not seen his pursuer, actually glided down and landed at an aerodrome well behind the Lines, just as Biggles reached the spot.

In his mortification, Biggles looked about him for a means of making his displeasure known, and, remembering that he still had a twenty-pound bomb on his rack, he sailed down and let it go at the unconscious cause of his wrath. He saw at once that the bomb would miss its mark, which annoyed him still more, but, knowing quite well that his single-handed attack would most certainly stir up a hornets' nest, he turned and made full-out for home.

He had not been back at Maranique for more than an hour when a dark-green Boche, who had evidently slipped over high up with engine cut off, hurtled down out of the clouds above the aerodrome. Everyone sprinted for cover, but the anticipated attack did not materialise. Instead, the Boche, which Biggles now saw was the same Roland two-seater that he had recently pursued, dropped a small packet with a streamer attached.

This, when picked up, was found to contain a letter, the gist of which was to the effect that Biggles' bomb had hit the carefully constructed private "bomb-proof" wine store of a certain Lieutenant von Balchow, with disastrous results to its highly prized contents.

This, it was stated, was a knavish trick, and the officer responsible for dropping the bomb was invited to pay for the wine or meet the owner in single combat at an appointed spot at a certain time. Von Balchow was evidently a scion of an ancient family who believed in the duel as the “grand manner” of settling a personal dispute.

Biggles had no intention of paying for the wine—he could not have done so had he wished. But, as he said, he was by no means against having a “stab” at the noble Von Balchow at any old time and place he liked to name.

In this admirable project, however, he was shouted down by such old-timers as Mahoney and MacLaren, who saw in the carefully prepared missive a sinister plot inviting a young British officer to come and be killed.

“This sort of thing has happened before,” Mahoney told Biggles bitterly. “But the fellow who has gone out to meet the other chap has seldom come back. If you want to know the reason, I’ll tell you. The thing is simply a trap, and I very much doubt if you hit the wine-store.

“Even in the event of your meeting the other fellow — which is doubtful—the rest of the bunch will be ‘upstairs’, waiting to carve you up if you happen to knock Von Balchow down. These fellows know just how to word a letter likely to appeal to the sporting instincts of poor boobs—like you!”

Biggles was hard to convince, but he finally allowed himself to be dissuaded. The following morning he did his usual patrol, which passed off without incident, and then returned, bored and bad-tempered, to the sheds, where he sat on an empty oil-drum and brooded over the matter of the previous day.

“What do those lads think they’re trying to do!” he asked Mahoney, who had seated himself on a chock close by, as a large party of Oriental coolies arrived and began unloading and spreading what appeared to be the brickwork of a house that had got in the way of a big shell.

“They’re going to repair the road,” Mahoney told him.

“What are those birds, anyway?” asked Biggles curiously.

“Chinese, from French Indo-China, I think. The French are using a lot of Colonial troops, but most of them simply for fatigue work—road-making and so on —behind the Lines.”

“What do they feed them on? I can smell ‘em from here,” declared Biggles disgustedly.

“Onions, mostly, by the aroma.”

“Well, for goodness’ sake let’s get on the up-wind side of them!” suggested Biggles. “*Look out!*”

He flung himself flat, as did Mahoney and his mechanics, who were fully alive to the danger that had precipitated itself from the clouds with a screaming roar. It was the green Boche two-seater. The pilot pulled up in a steep zoom at the bottom of his dive and then tore off in the direction of the Lines. As he did so a small object, with a streamer attached, fell to the ground and bounced merrily over the aerodrome.

“It’s Von Balchow!” yelled Biggles. “Where’s my Camel? It’s never ready when I want it! All right, flight-sergeant, don’t start up. It isn’t worth it. He’s half-way home by now. That’s another message for little Jimmy, I’ll bet. What does he say?”

Mahoney took the message from the air-mechanic who had retrieved it, tore open the envelope, read the contents and then burst into a roar of laughter. “Read it yourself!” he said.

Biggles read the message, which was in English, and his face grew slowly scarlet as he did so. “The sausage-eating, square-headed son of an offal-merchant!” he grated. “He says he’s sorry I didn’t turn up, but he didn’t really expect me. Can he send me a packet of mustard to warm my feet? Warm my feet, eh? I’ll warm his hide for him with my Vickers. Get my kite out, flight-sergeant!”

“Don’t be a fool, Biggles !” cried Mahoney, becoming serious. “Don’t let him kid you into committing suicide.”

“You go and chew a bomb!” Biggles told him coldly. “This is my show! I’m going to get that cocky tripe-merchant before the day is out, or I’ll know the reason why. Let him bring his pals if he likes—the more the merrier. Mustard, eh?”

Mahoney shrugged his shoulders. “I’ll go and pack your kit,” he said sadly, as Biggles climbed into his cockpit.

“You can pack what the dickens you like, but you let my kit alone,” Biggles told him wrathfully, as he took off.

He did not see the Roland in the air, but he hardly expected to, so he made a bee-line for its aerodrome, the whereabouts of which he was, of course, aware, having chased the machine home the day before. He was evidently unexpected, for when he reached it the aerodrome was deserted; but a long row of Rolands on the tarmac suggested that the officers of the *staffel* were at home, so he announced his presence by zooming low over the mess, warming his guns as he did so, but disdaining to fire at the buildings or the machines.

Instantly the scene became a hive of activity. The tarmac buzzed with running figures, some of whom sprang into the seats of the machines while others spun the propellers. He picked out the green machine as he zoomed down the line, and from two thousand feet watched it taxi out ready to take off.

He knew that his best opportunity would come as the machine actually commenced its run across the aerodrome, but he refused to take any step that would enable Von Balchow’s friends to say that he had taken an unfair advantage.

So he circled, waiting, until the machine was in the air at his own altitude before he launched his first attack, although he was well aware that other machines were climbing rapidly to get above him.

The Roland, with its powerful Mercedes engine, was a fighter of some renown, a two-seater comparable with our

own Bristol Fighter. Biggles knew its qualities, for knowledge of the performance of one's adversary is the first rule of air fighting; so he was aware that his opponent would not be "easy meat". Still he felt curiously confident of the upshot.

Whatever else happened, he was going to get Von Balchow, the man who had suggested that he had cold feet. Afterwards he would deal with the others as the necessity arose.

He saw Von Balchow's gunner clamp a drum of ammunition on his mobile Parabellum gun, and the pilot swing round to bring the gun to bear in preference to using his own fixed Spandau gun; but he was not to be caught thus.

Keeping the swirling propeller of the green machine between him and the deadly Parabellum he went down in a fierce dive under the nose of the machine, zoomed up above and behind it, and before the gunner could swing his gun to bear fired a quick burst.

Then, while the gunner was tilting his gun upwards, he stood the Camel on its nose, went down in another dive, and came up under the other's elevators. He held his fire until a collision seemed inevitable, and then pressed the lever of his gun. It was only a short burst, but it was fired at deadly range.

Pieces flew off the green fuselage, and as he twisted upwards into a half roll, Biggles noticed that the enemy gunner was no longer standing up.

"That's one of 'em," Biggles told himself. "I've given 'em a bit out of their own copy-book."

It was Richthofen, the ace of German air-fighters and the great master of attack, who laid down the maxim, "when attacking two-seaters, kill the gunner first."

Von Balchow, with his rear gun out of action, was crippled, and he showed little anxiety to proceed with the combat. Indeed it may have been that he lost his nerve, for

he committed the hopeless indiscretion of diving for his aerodrome.

Biggles was behind him in a flash, shooting the green machine to pieces from a range that grew closer and closer as he pressed the control-stick forward. He could hear bullets ripping through his own machine from the Rolands that had got above him, but he ignored them; the complete destruction of the green one was still uppermost in his mind.

Whether he actually killed the pilot or not he did not know, nor was he ever able to find out, although, in view of what occurred, it is probable that even if he was not killed by a bullet, Von Balchow must have been killed or badly injured in the crash. Hit or not, the German had sufficient strength left to try to flatten out for a landing; but either he misjudged his distance or was mentally paralysed by the hail of lead that swept through his machine, for his wheels touched the ground while he was still travelling at terrific speed with his engine full on.

The Roland shot high into the air, somersaulted, and then buried itself in the ground in the most appalling crash that Biggles had ever seen. The victory could not have been more complete, for he had shot down his man on his own aerodrome.

As he turned away he saw the German mechanics race towards the wreck; then he turned his eyes upwards. Prepared as he was for something bad, his pardonable exultation received a rude shock when he saw that the air was alive with black-crossed machines, the gunners of which were making the most of their opportunity. To stay and fight them all was out of the question.

He had achieved what he had set out to do, and was more than satisfied; all that remained was to get home safely. So down he went and began racing in the direction of the Lines with his wheels just off the ground.

The pilots of the other machines were on his tail instantly, but their gunners, being unable to fire forward, could do nothing. Moreover, they had to act warily, for to overtake their mark meant diving into the ground. Biggles did not remain on the same course for more than a few seconds at a time, but swerved from side to side, leaping over obstructions like a steeplechaser.

More than one officer came home in the same way during the war; in fact, it was a recognised course of procedure in desperate circumstances, although in the case of a single-seater it had this disadvantage—the pilot had to accept the enemy's fire, without being able to return it.

Yet, although it went against the grain to run away, to stay and fight against such hopeless odds could have only one ending. Biggles knew it, and checking the temptation to turn he held on his way, twisting and turning like a snipe. More than one bullet hit the machine, yet no serious damage was done.

He shot across the back area enemy trenches, a mark for hundreds of rifles, yet he had done too much trench strafing to be seriously concerned about them. All the same, he breathed a sigh of relief as he tore across the British lines to safety.

Then, as he sat back, limp from reaction, but satisfied that he had nothing more to fear, a shell, fired from a field gun, burst with a crash that nearly shattered his eardrums and almost turned the Camel over. The engine kept going, but a cloud of smoke and hot oil spurted back over the windscreen from the engine, and he knew it had been damaged.

The revolution counter began to swing back, and although he hung on long enough to get within sight of the aerodrome, he was finally forced to land, much to his disgust, in a convenient field about half a mile away.

The Camel finished its run about twenty yards from the hedge which bordered the road at the spot, and near where

some Tommies were working.

“Have any of you fellows got any water in your water-bottles?” he asked. “My word, I am dry!”

“Yes, sir—here you are!” cried several of them willingly.

He accepted the first water-bottle and had a long drink. “That’s better!” he declared, and whistling, walked home.

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THE PILOT WHO LOST HIS WAY

An incident from Biggles' career when he was a member of No. 169 (F.E.) Squadron. The F.E.s were 2-seater "pusher" types.

WITH HIS hands thrust deep into the pockets of his slacks Biggles stood at the mess window and eyed the desolate expanse of aerodrome despondently. He felt depressed. The weather was, to use his own expression, "foul". There was no wind, but from a leaden, moisture-laden sky alternate drizzle, hail, sleet and fine snow precipitated itself and obliterated the French landscape.

The dawn patrol had taken off as usual, but the machines had returned independently within an hour, each pilot reporting that the weather conditions were impossible, even for wartime, when weather conditions were seldom taken into consideration. Visibility was absolutely nil, and no good purpose could be served by remaining in the air.

"It seems a pity," he observed to Mark Way, his gunner, who was gazing blankly at the dismal spectacle of the deserted hangars from another window, "that wars cannot be arranged to take place in a more salubrious climate, or at a more comfortable time of the year. Oh, well, there'll be no more flying today, so let's make the most of it here!"

They turned towards the far side of the room, where a score of officers were clustered round the fire, but a sound from outside brought them to a halt. Silence fell upon the laughing, chattering group at the fire so that the musical hum of the wind in the wires of an approaching aeroplane could be heard distinctly.

"Suffering snowballs!" muttered Mark. "Who the dickens is up in this muck?"

"By all that's wonderful!" exclaimed Biggles, watching through the window a Spad, bearing the red, white and

blue cockades of the French Flying Corps, emerge from the mist and settle down clumsily on the aerodrome. Without waiting for the machine to finish its run its pilot swung round and taxied quickly towards the mess.

"I'd say he's lost," declared Marriot, who, with the others, had hurried to the window to watch the newcomer. "I'll bet that the first thing he asks is where he is—and, what's more, he'll be mighty glad to see our uniforms. He'd be lucky to know where he is to within twenty miles in this weather, and, for all he knows, this might be a Boche dump. Here he comes—look at him staring! I bet he'd jump if anyone fired a pistol."

"Don't you try anything like that!" snapped Captain Mapleton. "Whether he is lost or not he's our guest while he's here, and I hope no one will forget it."

"I was only joking," replied Marriot, a trifle shamefaced, watching the lone pilot, who had flung open his leather flying-coat revealing the blue uniform of a French officer, stride towards the door.

Mabs flung it open and greeted the visitor on the threshold.

"Come in!" he said. "You are courageous to fly in such terrible weather!"

"Thank you," replied the Frenchman, in English, shaking the water from his flying helmet. "I am lost— how do you say—lost to the wide world?"

"Have some coffee?" suggested Mabs. "It's still hot."

"Thanks. The air makes cold today, is it not?"

"You're right, it does," grinned McAngus, who had been on the dawn patrol. "You must be jolly keen to wander about in such weather."

The Frenchman shrugged his shoulders.

"It was not so impossible at the early hour," he protested. "My Escadrille flies always in all weathers, but this time we are lost. I am separate. I fly, and fly, but always there is the fog. There is no earth. Ten times I come down to land, but

each time I see only the Allemands—how do you say? The Germans—the Boche. They shoot, rat-tat-tat—so! I despair; I abandon hope. The petrol, it is finished almost. When it is finished I can no longer pour the sauce.¹ Then I see your field *d’aviation*—is it Boche? Is it Français or Anglais? I do not know, but I must land. Voilà! It is the good Anglais. I am saved!”

The French officer swallowed the remainder of his coffee and glanced round the room, smiling.

“What squadron do you come from?” asked Mabs. “If the weather clears up a bit you may still be able to get back today—if you haven’t too far to go.”

“The Spad Escadrille Fifty-eight, at Soyons des Dames.”

“Phew! You’re a long way off. This is St. Pielle, and we must be the best part of fifty miles farther north.”

“*Sacré!* I was lost indeed. But it matters nothing— we are among friends,” observed the Frenchman genially.

“Well, well, make yourself at home,” said Mabs, placing a chair near the fire for their guest. “I hope you will stay and have lunch with us?”

“*Merci; mille thanks!*”

The door leading into the dining-room opened and Major Paynter, the C.O., entered the room.

Now Biggles had been watching the Frenchman with amused interest, and up to that moment it had not for one instant occurred to him to suspect that the Spad pilot was anything but what he pretended to be. But as the door opened and Major Paynter came into the room, the Frenchman glanced up, and for one fleeting second his expression revealed something more than the whimsical smile he had worn ever since he had joined them.

Biggles happened to be looking directly at his face, and he distinctly saw the pupils of his eyes dilate and then return to normal. For a fraction of an instant it seemed as if Biggles saw, through that mask of assumed gaiety, a cold

deliberateness that did not reconcile itself to the man's manner.

Not a muscle of the Spad pilot's face had moved, yet the effect on Biggles was as if someone had poured a cup of cold water down his back. He passed his hand over his face, and then looked back at the Frenchman, who had sunk down in an easy-chair and had thrust his feet towards the blaze.

The talk turned, as it always does when airmen meet, to flying, and for some minutes Biggles watched intently for a repetition of the expression that he alone, of all officers in the room, seemed to have noticed. Major Paynter had joined the group, and was ragging the French lieutenant about losing his way.

"I shall have to send you back in a tender," he said.

"But no!" cried the Frenchman. "It is not *necessaire*. A *pilote de chasse* return to his aerodrome foot to earth? Never!"

"Just as you like," agreed the major. "But hadn't I better ring up your people and tell them you are here?"

"I will ring up my good friend Boulenger, if I may have the permission to speak on the telephone," said the Frenchman.

"You sit still and have some coffee," the major told him. "I'll ring up."

But the Frenchman had sprung to his feet and was half way across the room.

"No, no! No, no!" he cried. "I have a special message about tonight," he added, with a sly wink. "My good friend Boulenger and I were going to Rouen—mademoiselle will be waiting."

There was a general laugh in which Biggles stepped forward and directed their guest to the telephone in the hall.

"Yes, yes," he heard him say, "the Escadrille Fifty-eight. It is Marcel Vouvray, *pilote de chasse*, who speaks."

The conversation that followed—or as much as Biggles could hear of it—seemed perfectly natural to him, and he watched the man's return to the room with mixed feelings. Then an idea struck him, and he stepped forward.

"I called on the Escadrille Fifty-eight the other day, on my way back from seeing a friend in twenty-seven squadron, at Auchez," he said. "I got a bit off my course, and seeing the aerodrome, I dropped in to ask the way."

He paused to let the words sink in, aware that Major Paynter had turned a curious eye on him.

"I met a very charming officer there," he continued. "He went out of his way to do all he could for me. His name was Jacques Fabrier—Sous-lieutenant Jaques Fabrier. You would know him, of course?"

The French officer did not turn to meet Biggles' eyes, but he let out a hearty laugh.

"Of course!" he cried. "My old friend Jacques, the little son of a cabbage. He is a great one—yes?"

"A topping fellow. I thought you would know him," replied Biggles warmly. But inwardly his heart was anything but warm, for the man was lying. Biggles had never been near Soyons des Dames, and he had invented the name Jacques Fabrier on the spur of the moment.

He had used it to bait his trap, and the Frenchman had fallen into it. That he was not the man he claimed to be was now certain. Yet why should he lie? What object could he have in thus deliberately misrepresenting himself?

There was only one answer to the question. The man was a spy. Even as the words rose unbidden to his lips, Biggles knew that the thought had been in the back of his mind from the moment he had glimpsed the man's real character behind the face that laughed and the eyes that did not.

Biggles walked over to the window and stared with unseeing eyes across the vista of wintry desolation. Was he fancying things? Was he letting his imagination run away with him? It was one thing for an officer to drop into the

mess and tell an untruth, but quite another matter to condemn him as a spy on that account. What was the sum total of his evidence?

Simply the matter of that one queer look when the Major came in, and the one deliberate lie he had told. Biggles realised that this was all very flimsy, yet he could find no satisfactory reason to explain why the man, a French officer, should claim to belong to an Escadrille which events suggested was not his squadron at all.

Biggles felt that his reasoning was going round in circles, yet he could not rid himself of the uneasy feeling that something was wrong somewhere. Once more he returned to the fireside circle, where the conversation had now turned to the relative performances of British and French aeroplanes. If the French officer was a spy, then he was gathering important information with a vengeance, thought Biggles.

He noticed that the man seldom spoke, and when he did it was to ask a question rather than impart information.

Biggles gazed thoughtfully into the fire, wondering what he could do to prove whether or not his suspicions were correct. The C.O. had left the room to attend a conference at Wing Headquarters, or he would have found him and told him what he suspected.

What had the man said his name was over the telephone? Marcel Vouvray. Could he verify that? Not by using the telephone in the hall, for his conversation would be overheard by the officers in the room. Could he telephone from the squadron office? That would make the Recording Officer curious, and he naturally hesitated to take the risk of making a fool of himself.

In any case his French was not good enough to undertake a conversation with officers who might not know a word of English. There was no time to fly to Soyons des Dames, even if the weather improved, because the

Frenchman would certainly have taken his departure before he could get back. No, that would not do.

He thought hard for a few minutes, and then, with a nod and an inclination of his head to Mark, he left the room.

Mark followed him wonderingly. "What's the matter?" he asked, looking at Biggles' tense face, when they were in the hall.

"Listen, Mark," whispered Biggles earnestly. "I may be making a mountain out of a molehill, but that fellow in there is not what he pretends to be. I believe he's a spy."

"A sp—"

Biggles clapped his hand over Mark's mouth before he could say the word.

"Quietly!" he hissed. "Do you want him to hear you? You remember me telling him that yarn about Jacques Fabrier—he said he knew him? Well, there's no such person—at least, not that I'm aware of. That makes him out a liar, if nothing else. And have we any proof that he is what he says he is? What could be easier than for a Hun to slip across the Lines in this soup"—he indicated the lowering clouds with a jab of his thumb—"in a captured French machine and in a French uniform? Why, it would be as easy as A B C—and there are those fellows in there telling him all there is to know about our new equipment. That information is worth the lives of a hundred spies to Germany!"

"What are you going to do about it?" asked Mark, a trifle breathlessly. "Arrest him?"

"And then find I've made a mistake," retorted Biggles. "A pretty mess that would be."

"What then?"

"I can only think of one thing to do. The moment these clouds lift he'll be off, you mark my words, and we shall never see him again; nor will anyone else this side of the Line. He says he is going to Soyons des Dames, and I'm thundering well going to see that he does go there!"

"How?"

"You watch me, and play up when I give you the cue. I'm going to fly him to Soyons in the front seat of my machine. If he is genuine, he can't object to being taken home; if he isn't, well, I've got him. Somehow or other I'm going to get him into the air, and the moment we are off the ground I want you to ring up Wing—or get Toddy to do it—and tell them what I suspect. Ask them to tell the C.O. of French Escadrille Fifty-eight that one of his pilots, named Marcel Vouvray, has reported here, and we are bringing him home. If there is no pilot of that name in the squadron they'll say so, and then we can tell them to have an escort ready on the aerodrome to meet us when we land."

"But how are you going to get him into the F.E.?"

"Wait and see. I haven't time to explain now. The clouds are lifting, I believe, so I've no time to lose. I'm going up to the sheds now, where I can keep an eye on his Spad. I feel better now that you know about this; you can watch how things pan out."

"I will," agreed Mark.

Biggles took his flying-coat, cap, and goggles from their peg in the hall, then slipped along to his room. He opened a drawer, took out his automatic, which he did not normally carry, slipped it into his pocket, and walked quickly to the hangars.

"Sergeant Hopkins!" he called sharply, as he reached "A" Flight sheds.

"Here, sir!" The sergeant climbed down from an engine on which he had been working, and came towards him.

"Sergeant," went on Biggles quickly, "something funny is going on. I can't tell you what it is, but I'm just mentioning this so that if you think my behaviour is odd you will know I haven't gone crazy. Take no notice; you may understand later on. First of all, the Spad." He walked over to where the French machine was standing in the centre of a group of interested mechanics. "Dismiss the men," he said quietly.

"All right, get back to your work all of you—don't stand gaping here!" roared the N.C.O. "Get and wash down 4391, some of you."

The mechanics departed at the double.

Biggles eyed the Spad thoughtfully. "I've got to put this machine out of action for a bit," he muttered, "but it must be something that you can repair easily. What is the best thing I can do?"

"Puncture a tyre, I should think, sir, would be easiest."

"Then lend me that screwdriver of yours a minute."

Biggles took the tool and drove it with all his force into the tyre. There was a sharp hiss of escaping air as he withdrew it.

"That's that!" he said, with satisfaction. "Now get the tyre off as quickly as you can, but don't hurry about repairing it unless the weather starts to improve. If the French officer comes along, what I want you to say is that you've only just discovered the puncture, so you thought you'd better see about repairing it right away. Got that? Good. Now see about getting my machine out. Get it on the tarmac with the engine ticking over, just as if I was going to take it up for a test flight. Look alive, the clouds are lifting fast, and the French officer may be along here any minute."

"I get you, sir," replied the N.C.O. briskly. Then, turning and raising his voice: "Casey—Bright—Williams—Field—get 4391 outside and started up. Brown—Courtenay—start getting the tyre off this Spad. Come on!"

Biggles took his map from his pocket and studied the position of Soyons des Dames and the landmarks surrounding it until he felt quite sure that he would be able to find the French aerodrome without further reference to the map. He then looked around his machine to make sure that the tanks were full and everything else in order.

The sound of voices made him look up. Vouvray—or the man who called himself Vouvray—and several other officers,

including Mark, were strolling towards the hangars. The Frenchman had his flying-kit over his arm.

"Come on! Get that engine started!" Biggles ordered his fitter, crisply, then walked slowly round the machine, examining struts, wires, ailerons, and tail unit in just the same way as he would normally before making a test flight. His eyes, however, were not on the machine; they were on the Frenchman.

"What's the idea, Biggles?" called Mabs, with a puzzled frown.

"Oh, just a test!" replied Biggles casually. "She was flying a bit left wing low yesterday, so I've had her re-rigged, in case we had to turn out in a hurry.

"I'm afraid you're out of luck, though," he went on, addressing the Frenchman. "You must have picked up a flint as you taxied in. My sergeant has just discovered it; so, knowing you might want to get away, I've told him to get on with it as fast as he can."

The Frenchman halted, then took a quick step towards his machine. Biggles was watching him closely. He saw his fists clench suddenly as his eyes fell on the dismantled wheel, but not by any other movement did he betray what was passing through his mind. Yet those clenched hands told Biggles all he needed to know. The man was agitated, and his anxiety was increased by the delay the puncture would cause.

"It will be about half an hour before it's ready," went on Biggles. "Would you like to have a joy-ride in my machine while you're waiting? That is, if you're not afraid to fly in a British machine?"

The words were more than an invitation, and Biggles knew it. They expressed a challenge that no airman could ignore if he did not wish to be thought a coward.

"Thanks!" said Vouvray slowly. "I am delighted at such an honour"; and he started pulling on his flying-coat.

Biggles, who had climbed into his cockpit, glanced down. For an instant their eyes met, and he turned quickly to the instrument board in order that the other should not read what was in his mind. He no longer had any doubts about his man. In spite of that smiling exterior, he knew he was dealing with a cold, calculating enemy, who would kill him without the slightest compunction.

The French officer swung himself up into the gunner's cockpit, which in the F.E. is situated in front of the pilot, and settled down in his seat.

The clouds had lifted considerably, but they looked as if they might come down again at any moment; visibility was still very bad, limited perhaps to half a mile. Twice Biggles circled the aerodrome, noting that his passenger was taking more than a normal interest in the layout of the buildings, and then he struck off on a direct course for Soyons des Dames. He knew that he would be the best part of an hour reaching it at cruising speed.

The Frenchman twisted his head and raised his eyebrows questioningly as the machine struck off on what was obviously a deliberate course; but Biggles only smiled and pretended to be studying his controls. Five minutes passed and still the machine held on its course. Again the Frenchman turned. This time he was not smiling.

"Where you go?" he shouted.

Biggles knew that pretence could not help him much longer. Within the next five minutes his passenger must know for certain that they were not merely testing the plane but were bound for a definite destination. He therefore decided to settle the matter once and for all, "Soyons des Dames—to see Jaques Fabrier!"

A look of understanding dawned swiftly in the other's eyes, and his hand started creeping down towards his pocket. But Biggles was ready. His automatic leapt into his left hand, and the muzzle bored into the leather-clad back of his passenger.

“Put your hands outside the cockpit!” he bellowed; and as the order was obeyed: “If you move them I’ll blow a hole through you!” he added.

Twenty minutes passed, and he began to find the strain of flying the machine with his right hand, keeping the Frenchman covered with his left, and at the same time watching his landmarks, almost unbearable.

The country was new to him or he would have made for the nearest aerodrome, either British or French; but he knew of none in the vicinity, and it was impossible for him to examine his map. Another five minutes passed slowly, and then the clouds came down as if suspending cords had been suddenly cut.

He had been flying at a thousand feet, which was as high as he could get without entering the clouds, and as they closed down on him he was compelled to push the joystick forward. Lower and lower he was forced, until he was swimming over the landscape at two hundred feet, and the machine began to rock in the air currents set in motion by the great mass of moving moisture.

A spatter of snow swept into his face, and the ground was almost obliterated by the scurrying flakes.

An upcurrent caught the machine and lifted it like a feather, and at the same moment a thick scurry of snow piled up on his goggles, temporarily blinding him. He could not take his right hand from the joystick, for it was as much as he could do to keep the machine under control, so he was compelled to use his left hand to push up his goggles in order to see. As if he had been waiting for that very moment Vouvray twisted like an eel in his seat and struck. His right hand caught Biggles’ left arm, already weary with holding the automatic, and forced it down on to the windscreen in a grip of iron. With his left hand he tore the weapon from Biggles’ grasp.

Biggles did not stop to think, but acted with a suddenness that surprised himself. The spy was actually levelling the

automatic when Biggles kicked out his left foot on the rudder-bar, and then jerked the stick back into his right thigh. The instant result was a stunt that he never attempted to repeat.

The machine, subject first to full rudder, skidded like a heavy car on a greasy road, and then zoomed upwards. The spy was flung violently against the opposite side of the cockpit. For a moment Biggles thought he was going overboard, but he recovered himself by an effort, grabbing at the edge of the cockpit with both hands. The automatic hurtled away into space.

By the time Biggles had got the machine on even keel and on its course again—or what he hoped was its course—the spy had drawn a Mauser from his pocket and covered him. Biggles found himself staring straight down the muzzle of the weapon.

The spy made a threatening gesture with his gun, but Biggles ignored it. The spy then pointed to the east, and Biggles knew what he meant; he was to fly over the Lines to Germany, so that when his petrol ran out and he was forced to land, the other would be in his own country.

If the supposed Frenchman shot Biggles, the machine would crash, and kill him, too. Even if Biggles found an aerodrome and attempted to land, the spy would shoot as soon as their wheels touched, and try to escape. It looked as if whatever move he made could only have one ending—the death of both of them.

He saw a thin patch in the clouds just ahead, and as he climbed towards it a new idea struck him, and he wondered why he had not thought of it before. The spy was standing up, watching him, leaning back on the far side of his cockpit. He was not strapped in, having undone the safety belt when he had made his first attack.

Biggles set his teeth, thrust the stick forward savagely, then pulled it back into his stomach. The machine soared upwards in a loop. He saw the other's face change as he

realised his peril. He watched him throughout the loop and saw him jam his shoulders into the sides of the cockpit as they came over the top. And then they were on even keel again in the same relative positions as before.

The ruse failed, and Biggles knew the reason. In his anxiety he had looped too quickly, and centrifugal force had kept the man in the machine. Very well, he would try a slow loop, and see if that would do the trick.

He had gripped the joystick in order to put his plan into execution when the spy raised his gun and pulled the trigger. Biggles ducked instinctively. The report nearly deafened him. He felt nothing, yet it seemed impossible that the fellow could miss at such close range. Another bullet whizzed past his head. Missed again!

The spy was taking aim for the third time when Biggles realised that he was shooting at the propeller!

Bang! Biggles held his breath as a fourth shot rang out. He knew instantly that it had missed, for vibration would immediately announce a hit. The corners of the spy's mouth turned down as with his left hand he reached for one of the drums of Lewis-gun ammunition that rested under the gun mounting.

Biggles' heart stood still. With such a missile it was impossible to miss. He had braced himself for the shock, when the other dived suddenly to the floor of the cockpit.

At the same instant the unmistakable rattle of a machine-gun from somewhere near at hand came to Biggles' ears. He glanced back over his shoulder. A green-and-red German Albatros was dropping on them like a stone, two long streams of yellow fire pouring from the guns under its centre section. In the face of the new danger the old one was forgotten, and Biggles slewed the F.E. round in a mad turn.

He felt the vicious impact from several bullets striking the machine; but they seemed to do no damage, and he went into a deep turn to consider the situation. The spy

jumped up in his seat as soon as the bullets stopped, and made frantic signals to the pilot of the black-crossed machine as they whirled round in a tight circle.

The Boche pilot lost no time in expressing his contempt of the signals, which obviously meant nothing to him, for he treated the F.E. to another murderous burst of fire. Biggles, who had no gun, could do nothing but stunt, and he stunted as he had never stunted before.

The spy was cowering on the bottom of the cockpit. In the brief intervals between each stunt, Biggles snatched quick glances at the ground, wondering if it had been possible for him to cross the Lines during the snowstorm without being aware of it. He decided that it was not possible, and the Hun was hunting over the Allied side of the Lines.

He straightened the F.E., looking around for his aggressor. He was just in time to see the red, white and blue cockades of a French Spad race past him. Two more were tearing towards the scene. Then the clouds seemed to open and fill the air with a million flying snowflakes.

Biggles caught his breath and struggled to keep pace with the swiftly moving events. Swift as the sight of the Spad had been, he had noticed the figure 58 painted in white on the side of the fuselage. That could only mean that the machine belonged to Escadrille Fifty-eight, so Soyons des Dames could not be far away. Actually, although he did not know it, the Spad pilots, who had received orders from Headquarters, were out looking for him.

Half-blinded by the driving snow which was fast piling up in every corner of the machine where it could find a hold, Biggles stared anxiously below, trying to see the ground. He ignored his passenger.

Whatever happened when they reached the ground, landing could no longer be delayed. A white sheet, broken by dark, discoloured patches, seemed to rise up to meet him. It was the snow-covered landscape.

There was no question of choosing a landing-place, and he snatched the throttle back, intending to hold the machine off as long as he could, praying frantically that it would be a hedge and not a solid wall that arrested his progress. The chances were a thousand to one against finding a spot free from obstruction.

His wheels struck the ground violently, and the machine shot twenty feet into the air.

A dull grey mass loomed ahead, and Biggles covered his face with his arms. There was a tearing, splintering crash and then silence.

Instantly he was fighting furiously to extricate himself from the tangle of woodwork, fabric, wires and the branches of the tree with which they had collided. Blood was streaming from a cut over his eye, and he was conscious of a nauseating pain in his left ankle, but he paid no heed to it.

He dragged himself clear and limped painfully to a leafless hedge, where he flung himself down, expecting every moment to feel a bullet boring into his body.

He raised his head and looked around; the spy was nowhere in sight. For two or three minutes Biggles remained thus, watching and listening. The silence, after the roar of his engine, was appalling, and seemed to overwhelm him.

The only sound was the soft hiss of the falling snow-flakes. He began to crawl slowly towards the wreck. Had it been his luck to escape while the spy had been disabled? He did not know, but he would soon find out. He raised himself on the bank beside the hedge, eyes searching the wreck, and he caught his breath sharply as he saw a boot projecting from a tattered wing.

It was the work of a moment to limp across, seize the leading edge and lift it. The spy lay motionless, blood oozing from a small hole in the centre of his forehead. Biggles let the wing fall again and stood swaying.

“Killed by a bullet from one of his own side. That’s poetic justice, if you like!” he muttered weakly.

The sound of voices made him look up with a start. A dozen blue-coated soldiers were scrambling over the hedge, some officers at their head. They stopped when they reached the machine and saluted gravely. Then one of them, an elderly officer with a grey beard, lifted the wing and gazed at the body underneath. There was a curious expression on his face when he looked up.

“My name is Major Bricault, of the French Intelligence Service,” he said quietly in English.

“Do you—know him?” asked Biggles, inclining his head towards the body of his late passenger.

“Yes, only too well,” was the reply. “He has been known to us for some time. We know him as Franz Hymann, of the German Secret Service. But let us help you to the car. We came as quickly as we could when we heard the crash; we were waiting on the aerodrome, which is not far away.

“We will ring up your squadron and tell them you are safe, and that you are dining with us tonight!”

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¹ *Pour the sauce*: French idiom for open the throttle.